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A STRANGE TEMPTATION

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BY

Mrs. J. KENT SPENDER

AUTHOR OF

"A WAKING," "MR. NOBODY," "RECOLLECTIONS OF A COUNTRY DOCTOR,"

"GODWYN'S ORDEAL," "PARTED LIVES,"

"LADY HAZLETON'S CONFESSION,"

ETC., ETC.

One frequently hears a story of John Bradford quoted with approval, in which it is said that, seeing a condemned criminal on his way to Tyburn Tree, he exclaimed, "There, but for the grace of God, goes John Bradford." Many, perhaps most, have not yet reached that level, but Pharisaically condemn those who have succumbed to forces and temptations from which their judges have been free. Few are those who understand that a better and truer utterance of the Puritan worthy would have been: "There goes one for whose state John Bradford is partly responsible!"

JOTTINGS FROM JAIL.

IN THREE VOLUMES—VOL. III

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CHAPTER VI.

“LET IT SLEEP!”

“I HAVE spoken bitterly to him now—he who so little deserved it! I have added one more to the unpardonable faults I have already committed against the best and kindest benefactor I ever met with,” thought Mrs. Carlyon, as she again sought silence and solitude.

Her heart seemed to be rent in two by the choice between two opposite courses of action, each of which equally commended itself to her judgment. Would it not be the lesser crime for her to continue to deceive her husband, if by so doing she could save him from knowing the truth concerning his own dishonour—he,

the true and the noble, who ought never to have been deceived? On the other hand, if Ben had determined to tell him, it might be better for her at all risks to make a clean breast of it herself. But Ben was naturally good-hearted, and having already avenged himself with the sight of her humiliation, he might content himself with what he had done. He might think better of his further threats when he left England—for had he not talked of going back to the Colonies?—and everything might then be forgotten as if it were wiped out, never again to start up into awful existence, like a handwriting on the wall, against her.

Meanwhile the time moved slowly on, and it was as if a cloud had fallen on the household. Mrs. Carlyon, who spent a good many hours lying on the sofa in her bedroom, was painfully conscious of the silence around her—a silence which could almost be felt. Ralph's voice was never now heard giving orders to the men, or singing snatches from favourite songs,

as he went up and down the stairs. Even the servants moved quietly, and the butler was more discreet and solemn than usual as he waited upon them at meals. This demon of silence seemed even to sit upon Phillis's lips. It would have been a relief to hear her scolding, but she never scolded now. Polly wondered vaguely how much she had been told; but in reality Phillis knew nothing. If she had hitherto had a sort of idea that her brother should keep a tighter rein over his wife, in her heart she now reproached herself for having cherished that thought. For the wife looked so subdued, so haggard, and so changed, that Phillis—coming every now and then on the tracks of what Mrs. Carlyon had been doing amongst the villagers, and finding her so ailing—was sorry for her, and accused herself of having failed to do her sister-in-law justice.

The weeks passed into months, till autumn faded into winter, and winter was already beginning to wear its priestly garments of white snow; but still nothing

happened. Polly now spent most of her spare time in the nursery, comforting herself with her infant, hugging it sometimes close to her bosom in vehement embrace, as if its warmth might melt the stone which felt as if it had taken the place of her heart, and at other times covering it with kisses till it cried, but never crooning to it now in the tunes which she had rehearsed long ago at the theatre, or in snatches of the ballads which she had been learning to sing to her guitar. She knew so little of what was going on outside the house that it was a matter of surprise to her to find that Ralph had dismissed the head-gardener and his wife, and that new people had taken their places at the lodge.

Though he had never again alluded to what had passed between himself and his wife, the whole episode and the lame attempts which she had made to clear herself had evidently had a painful effect on him. He was dissatisfied, ill at ease, conscious, in spite of himself, of a sore feeling somewhere—a wound which could not be localized, and which

pained him nevertheless. The contrast of the calm, autumnal, homelike scenery—the rich and quiet nature which he had known and loved from his boyhood—with the riot excited within him, was hard for him to bear. His heart yearned over his wife, and he had taken the precaution of sending the people away who knew of that mysterious evening's adventure, yet the problem remained insoluble. There must be some solution of it, he told himself in vain—there *must*, and that solution must be favourable. Yet his reasoning powers were inexorable, and link after link fitted into a chain of evidence which made him suspicious. If it were true that some stranger might be in possession of a dark secret concerning Lea's previous life, it would account for those humours which he had sometimes thought so inexplicable and so capricious—her fits of silence, her nervous terror of the darkness, her craving for frivolous pleasure, accompanied by that strange dread of appearing in public, and—worse than all—her paroxysms of excitement.

Ralph was a good man, according to the ordinary acceptation of the word—good and honest in all the relations of life; but it was a part of his goodness to pride himself on his justice. Therefore, he was not as much moved as Phillis expected him to be when his sister told him one day of her anxiety about his wife. “She is quite different to what she used to be; you can see it with half an eye. She used to have too good an opinion of herself, and now she is always running herself down. I asked her the other day why she talked so little at meals; I said there was all the difference between being too merry and too depressed, and she answered me—you would scarcely believe it—‘I don’t know what to say to please him. The worst of it is I feel he has a sort of ideal before him, which is not at all like me. I almost wish he knew me as I really am.’ And another day, when I was speaking of some of the bad people—you know there are one or two in the village we can scarcely tell what to do with, she said, I

suppose in jest, 'I, also, am one of the irreclaimable.' "

He, who had been so used to be chivalrous and deferential to women, stood, as his sister thought, oddly silent for a moment. Then he said abruptly, "She is out of sorts; get Eleanor to come to her."

"Eleanor is in training for her hospital nursing."

"They give them holidays; Eleanor works too hard. It is time for her to have a change. Why, now I come to think of it, she has had no change since she was here early in the spring. There is a strange sympathy between those two. You and I are cast in a rougher mould; we do not pretend to understand those subtle shades of nervous susceptibility which Eleanor and my wife have both of them in exaggeration."

Phillis was affronted; it was necessary to pay her some compliments on her superior good sense.

And as a proof of that curious, attractive, magnetic sympathy between two people so different in various ways as Lea and Sister Eleanor, the latter managed

to make arrangements with the proper authorities for coming at once, directly she knew that Mrs. Carlyon was out of health, and asking for her.

Sister Eleanor came before Christmas, and for the first time the invalid slept without the sensation of falling from a height into an abyss, followed by waking with her limbs jerking and a nervous feeling of unrest. She lay still on the morning after Eleanor's arrival, telling herself in—what her husband called—her “exaggerated way” that a few rays of the divine peacefulness which encircled the Sister had fallen on herself. She remembered the reports which had reached her when she first came to Woodlands of the projected marriage between the cousin and the man who was now her own husband—Ralph Carlyon—but declared to herself, more decidedly than ever, not only that Eleanor herself had spoken as if there were no truth in such idle gossip, but that such reports were inconsistent with the Sister's look of perfect content, and imperturbable repose. She was conscious of wonder-

ing if the far-off look in Eleanor's gaze could really mean much, or if the look were caused by the colouring of the eyes, which was like the mystic blue of the horizon on an autumn day. Could Ralph have been indifferent to this refinement and subtle harmony, this almost magnetic charm of manner, or was it as Tennyson wrote in his well-known lines, “because she had been always with him in the house” that he “thought not of Dora?” Was it, in plain English, because he had been always used to Eleanor that he had become wearied of her, or had thought her dull and sad?

“It is I who am dull and sad now,” thought Polly, as she watched Miss Hudson moving about the room, touching everything deftly with noiseless, tidying fingers.

A new light seemed indeed to have come into her face, a strange beauty; the lines of the mouth were set, not in hardness or obstinacy, but to high purposes and noble sacrifices.

“You seem to move as if on winged feet, scarcely

touching the ground; I suppose they teach you to tread like that—it is a part of your training?" asked Polly, suddenly remembering how she had heard that the life of a hospital nurse had a wonderfully softening effect on a good many people.

She did not intend at first to talk about herself, but indulged in speculations as to this mystery which was so strange to her—a Sister's life. She tried to imagine how it would be to long for self-sacrifice, to thirst to spend oneself in some way for other people, and envied Eleanor because she could find sufficient satisfaction in the quiet services of the Church, and in ministering to the wants of the poor. Eleanor's soul could no longer be torn asunder by the fear of not spending to the best advantage the short interval which intervened between the cradle and the grave. Polly wondered if the gentle manners of those with whom she daily associated, and the absence of any cause for provocation in her daily life had had the happy effect of evoking all that was best and noblest

in her. She had gained insight enough through her own suffering to guess that such a routine might have had the effect of calming what had once been physical sensitiveness, and of lifting her into a higher plane of being.

"She used to be nervous," she mused, "and now she is placidly serene, whilst I—I have lost it both ways—I have aimed at my own happiness and missed it, and I—I am terribly afraid of dying," thought the invalid, as she listened to the Sister's soothing if somewhat monotonous talk. "I wonder you don't hate having to be so often with suffering people. It is very good of you, but I am afraid I should long desperately to change it all. If I were in your place I should remember that I could have only one life and I should want to get the best out of it, if I were independent like you," she said after a pause. And Eleanor, looking up, could hardly believe that it was Ralph's wife speaking to her in this way, with a tremor of emotion in her voice.

She tried to explain.

"It is only at first that you would feel like that—you would get used to it afterwards. At first it *is* rather a strain, but if you look at it in the right way, you end by being so sorry for the sufferers who have to bear pain. And as for oneself," she added, with a bright smile, "I sometimes used to think I should like travelling and change of scene, but now I am quite content to hear about all the beautiful things in the world from other people." She did not add that she felt as if she must wait till she reached Heaven to see her sights, and that her faith made it easy for her to bear any present deprivation. But her smile unconsciously said these things for her.

"I am afraid I should grudge the other people all the sweets in this life. I should feel as if a bird in the hand were worth two in the bush, and want the good things now; I always think in that bad way; I never cared about Heaven or Hell, and directly I learnt about the Copernican system, *my* Heaven and

Hell were swept away," said Polly, trying to be incorrigible.

She could have smiled at another time to see how Sister Eleanor unconsciously recoiled a step or two, as if shocked by the profanity of such reckless words, and how, directly afterwards, she made an effort to conquer herself, touched by the expression of weariness in the sick woman's face, coming nearer to her, and stooping over her as she whispered,

"He that loseth his life for *My* sake shall find it."

Pity blended with tenderness was shining in her eyes, and her pale face was glorified, for it had something of the divine compassion in it.

"Oh, not *that*, not *that*! Do not talk to me in that style. Whatever else I have been in my life I never was a hypocrite, and never mean to be one. I have no part nor lot in all those fine sayings. Why, what would you say if you knew I had tried to grasp my life, and lost my own soul in the effort to grasp it?" cried the invalid, laughing hysterically. "Of

course I am talking to you in parables, but there are straits in which even *you* could not help people if you tried."

Eleanor felt suddenly cold when she looked at Mrs. Carlyon with searching eyes. Could there be anything real in this wild, hysterical talk—something which had been kept from Ralph and which he did not know?

Then she rallied herself and answered,

"It is one thing for you to try to lose your own soul, and another for God to let go His grasp on you. You hint at the worst but you do not frighten me—Christ Jesus receives sinners."

But Polly only turned away from her with an emphatic negative gesture of both hand and head.

"Something is the matter," pleaded the other woman, "would it not be better for you to tell *me*. I am used to confidences of all kinds, and believe me, I will not betray yours."

The intention was excellent, but Polly could not avail herself of the kindness of the offer.

“If you cared for me and liked me a little when you believed me to be as other women, do you think I would throw away that liking by telling *you* if I happened to have done anything that was terribly wrong?—you who stand on such a higher platform as it is?” she answered excitedly. “No, I was only trying you as I sometimes try Phillis. Why, that poor thing is vexed and bored with me from morning to night, and yet she bears with me—because I am ill.”

The illness, indeed, seemed to be making progress, and Eleanor—though she had been shocked for the minute by a glimpse into the anatomy of a moral nature which she could not understand, though she had recoiled from the inner workings of a heart so suddenly revealed to her—yet rallied herself at once, and felt herself justified in saying to Ralph,

“You must make excuses for her. She is sensitive, excitable, it is her constitution.” Possibly the peaceful presence in the house gave Ralph himself a sense of rest, and he was willing enough to be appealed to

about his wife. For Eleanor, who had not failed to notice that there was something wrong between the two, was certain that Mrs. Carlyon's heart beat more quickly at the sound of Ralph's beloved voice, and that her spirit seemed to have no separate existence apart from his. "She droops when she is not with you; she is always pining in your absence," she ventured to say in her *rôle* of peacemaker, aware of some angry, perturbed feeling which made it impossible for Ralph to be at ease. She saw that he, too, was not himself, moving about from the house into the garden, and from the garden into the house, getting up and walking in the room after sending his food away untasted, and she had been trying in vain to seek for the cause of his distress. She could not guess that he was possessed of a hateful suspicion, and was hating himself for the possession, taking himself to task for yielding to the lower nature, which was getting the upper-hand over the higher one. He accused himself of having made too much of that episode about

the beggar. What a fool he was to yield to irascible words—he, a cultivated man, who had not the excuse of the savage!

He fell to reasoning with himself about the problem. The mind was, after all, under the power of the body, and when the body was out of sorts it was a physiological necessity that feelings and impulses, which a man in his better moods might dismiss as weak and unhealthy, should have power over the system. He would brace himself by a ride on horseback, or he would take a spade and till the ground in the sweat of his brow, as Tolstoï had tilled it. Such a feeling as jealousy was diametrically opposed to all the nobler traditions of his life. He must fight against it, put his foot upon it and crush it, as he would have crushed a deadly serpent, for it was a feeling which had never assailed him till he was married.

So when Eleanor said to him, with a smiling face, “Give her time, she has taken root: but some plants are better for a change of soil; I should take her

again to London, if I were you—in the spring—as soon as she is better”—he did not alarm her by suggesting that there was another side to her hopeful diagnosis, and it was that which had not been counted upon, the unexpected, which so often happened. It seemed wiser to work hard again, in his own way, at amateur farming, when the weather would allow it, and to fatigue himself once more by hunting in the February days, so that he should not have too much time for meditation. The sort of torpor which brought a sense of comfort to him, as to the majority of men, after a good dinner and an exhausting day in the open air, made him unwilling to argue, and ready enough to accept Eleanor's solution of the difficulty.

Once, and once only, during that winter he alluded, in a *tête-à-tête* with his wife, to the odd behaviour of an insolent man, and his dismissal of the gardener. But the quivering of the delicately-chiselled nostrils, and the haughty pose of her head, a little thrown back in disdain, made him repent that he had done so.

“Let it sleep!” she said; “don’t ask me to go back to it. The beggar frightened me dreadfully, but we have been happy again lately; and oh, my dear, my dear, why should we not always be happy? Why should we try to dig up the past?”

CHAPTER VII.

A DISASTROUS LETTER.

IT was April again at Forest Hill. The winter which Polly always hated was over, and the spring in which she had ever delighted was returning. The willows were already donning their catkins, and the larches were robing themselves in their fresh spring green. A shimmer as of coming foliage was faintly to be seen on the tops of the hazel trees, whilst the black buds were on the ashes; and the beeches, still unclothed, held out their skinny claws, white in contrast with the foliage of the dark Scotch firs. The streams were all set free from their wintry sleep, and filled the air with a faint babble as of distant multi-

tudinous voices. In the garden at Woodlands the blackbird was already whistling to his mate, and the linnets and chaffinches trilling to the richer notes of the thrush. It was as if with the advent of the young spring god the bitterness of death were altogether over. For as Polly had recovered her health the impulse to penitential confession had remained in abeyance; Eleanor had returned once more to her work, and Phillis was absent on a visit.

To know that an arrow intended to hit her has been shot into the air, and that if it has "fallen to the earth, she knows not where," may be a recollection to make a sensitive woman wince, but scarcely to cause her to be apprehensive about the future. To have had an impression as if he had been on the edge of some new and important discovery, and to be forced, after all, to acknowledge that there was nothing to discover, may be an equally galling remembrance to a man, but one which he is only anxious to wipe out. But what if that arrow, supposed to be lying somewhere, harm-

lessly hidden, should suddenly transfix your heart? What if the discovery, which had always been dreaded, should prove worse than your uttermost fear had anticipated?

Ralph Carlyon looked as if some such calamity had befallen him when—coming down early one morning in that sunshiny April—he found a letter from London, in an unusually bold and scrawly handwriting, awaiting him amongst his other letters. His hands trembled nervously as he read it, then he tossed it on the small fire which was burning in the grate, threw up some ashes, and raked the ashes on it. The complexion of his thoughts remained darker after he had burnt it. “It’s a lie,” he said to himself, “a vile, concocted, cursed lie.” Yet the lie seemed to have fallen upon him with a sudden blow, for he felt blinded and deafened, unable to think. His wife had not yet left her room; she had been later in the mornings since her second so-called “nervous attack” in the autumn, and her subsequent convalescence. There had been

days when she had almost seemed to hibernate during that winter, like some butterflies which are supposed to conceal themselves from the frost and the snow. But Ralph had had long patience, and his patience had only lately seemed to be rewarded. It had been usual for him to begin his breakfast without waiting for her, but somehow, on this morning, he had no appetite for the meal, and felt that he could not endure the suspense of such waiting.

"I will go and ask her—she will be able to set it all right," he said; so haunted was he by the weight of the nightmare conveyed by that letter, which he was unable to shake off, that uncertainty became intolerable, and he longed for the relief even of knowing what might possibly shock him.

As he went slowly up the stairs, staggering, as if he were dazed, under the weight of his fear, he remembered that till he met his wife they had laughed at him for being a woman-hater, and that he had been set against the majority of women because of their ten-

dency to manœuvre, but that Lea had impressed him as being different from the rest, with a soul of candour.

In another minute—she must have heard her husband's voice at the door of her room, yet she inquired, "Who's there?"

"It is I," he answered. "I have come to you because I could not bear the suspense about something. Open to me; I must speak to you, it is very important."

"Wait a minute, and I will open. Come to the door of the boudoir."

He heard the sound of her little feet pattering across the floor, and then she held the door of the adjacent room ajar so that he could scarcely get a glimpse of her, though she was fully dressed. "What is it?" she asked, and he noticed that her voice shook. The cruel suspense which she had suffered during the winter months had had more to do with her habit of hiding herself in her bedroom than anybody could have guessed. But *now!* surely the bitterness of death had passed!

"It is a letter from that fellow; he has written at last. I thought it as well to burn it, for where a woman is concerned one cannot bring an action without compromising the woman."

She had opened the door by this time. "What did he say?" she asked, but the words were scarcely audible. She had evidently not been able to recover from her surprise.

"Do not ask me," he said, hesitatingly—his ears seeming to tingle at the memory of the words; "the whole story is so flagrantly, palpably absurd. When you were in 'Frisco' did you know a girl named Polly?"

She stood silent, as if deprived of her powers of speech, but her sidelong, furtive look betrayed her. Then a flash which seemed to shoot through his brain informed him that she was not so innocent as she seemed to be. She must know something—why did she not speak?

"Polly—a girl named Polly!" she repeated.

"Go on," he said, fiercely. "Tell me it is not true. Let me throw the horrible lie back into the fellow's teeth. Be quick and tell me all about it; we need never refer to the subject again."

But she stood staring at him with an idiotic stare. And he looked at her in return, with a sense of never having understood or seen this woman as she really was, till now—when she was revealed to him for the first time in his life. He read the lines in her startled face with an intuition which was horrible; they seemed to him full of subtlety and cunning. Even her smile showed how she had foiled him, as she repeated, "Polly—a girl named Polly? do you remember how you promised not to ask me foolish questions?"

He was unfair to her at that minute; unfair even in his loathing of the dainty, coquettish morning wrapper, with the loops and knots of ribbon and the delicate lace—all the superfluities of a pretty woman's toilet. Never before had he looked with

such contempt at the little room in which she had indulged her tastes without undue extravagance. A hammock, in which she had been fond of reclining in the warm August days, beneath the trees of the garden, was now swung up in one corner in the midst of fans, palms, and oriental surroundings. Several of the curious things which she had brought with her from London—bamboo furniture, Satsuma china, Benares vases, and hangings with monstrous creatures, strange birds and odd devices, had been relegated to this boudoir. A huge Japanese umbrella decorated the middle of the ceiling, whilst eastern mats adorned the polished floor. It might be the fashion of the day, but it had always seemed to him rather childish. He had laughed good-humouredly at it in former days, but now he turned away with derision. An odour, as of incense mixed with *pot-pourri*, floated about the room—that also was absurd. It was a part of this woman's character—this childish puerility—this love of theatrical tawdriness.

The mind which he had credited with some sort of earnestness was after all a mere trumpery, frivolous, plotting, manœuvring mind. His eyes fell on a hand looking-glass of Dresden china—roses and Cupids. It also excited his irony, and he made an exclamation of disgust.

“Yes, a girl named Polly. What did you know of her?” he asked, as he opened the window and let in a rush of the fresh outside air, his glance cutting through her like a knife, as he turned round and looked at her. “Tell me quickly, without more ado.”

“The other day,” she stammered, “you told me you did not want any such confidences. Why should you change so suddenly? I can’t unbury my past. Why cannot we let it alone? I do not ask to know about yours.”

“This is a sudden change because circumstances have changed. Don’t let us bandy words, but tell me—if it is possible for you to speak the truth—if

you have not so accustomed your lips to falsehood that you can only open your mouth to lie." Then he averted his face. The flow of blood which made him fling out bitter remarks might be lessened by the breeze which came in at the open window. His tone softened almost unconsciously.

"I would rather you take your time and speak just as is natural to you. It is uncomfortable to have to pick and choose one's words. The man said he put off writing till he was leaving England. He wished to give you a respite. Tell me what you can to explain all this," he added, as, leaning his head on the window-sill, he waited for her answer.

She had imagined it all before. She had seen in some of her dreams that look of aversion on his face, blended with the anguish which made him dumb, as he waited for her explanation. Often and often she had seen it, between sleeping and waking, during her anxious nights when she had lain restless on her bed and heard the sound of his quiet breathing beside

her. She had struggled against the coming of this hour, she had defied the Fates, but the Fates had been too strong for her. She had no resource but to defend herself by changing the attack.

“Did I know a girl named Polly? What if I did? What if I knew a lot of people I did not talk about to *you*? What if I had strange secrets and constant thoughts I could not share with you? It was all for your sake, because I knew that you and your people were formal and precise, and could not feel for one who had been knocked about in the world like I had, till I was battered out of the proper shape; it was all for your sake if I concealed any secrets. O! it's only that your rose-coloured spectacles have fallen off; did I not always tell you that they were rose-coloured? Your mind is only released from its misconceptions. I was not your ordinary pretty girl, made ready for the English slave market. Did I ever pretend to be one of those girls, with their false modesty and worldly maxims? Is it my fault if I had no mother

to train me up and prepare me for the slave market? Am I any the worse? All these restrictions and these moral theories which the mothers preach, and contradict by their actions—do they make your English girls any better at heart? Are you such a very moral nation? *You* are hypocritical, if you please.” (He thought she was out of her mind; and so, in truth, she was.) “You accuse me of lying, but I tell you it is only a case of more or less untruthfulness, and that if I was driven into it, I hated it all the time. Appearances are always more or less false for us women—especially the poor wretches who are born the pariahs of society. The really wicked society is that of the rich and fashionable people, who have never been tempted and have no excuse for their wickedness. Bohemia is not half so bad, though I belong to it. The police may have orders to take up the vagabonds, but the vagabonds are not so corrupted at the core as some of your bedizened dukes and duchesses.”

Thus she raved, and she flattered herself that there was truth in her raving. She herself was frightened at the pent-up passion which burst forth from her. But the choking of her voice, which at first made it difficult for her to finish her sentences, abated as she went on. It was not for nothing that she had listened to Dick's socialistic harangues, or to the cynical talk of clever literary men in her London lodgings. The arguments which she retailed seemed to her so worthy of consideration that, as she recapitulated them, she recovered a measure of her self-command.

But when her husband answered, coldly, "I do not grasp your meaning. Will you answer my simple question if you knew a girl named Polly, years ago, in San Francisco? Tell me if it is true that she had plighted her troth to a man who loved her and was faithful to her, and why she had recourse to a trick which was criminal, in order——"

She interrupted him, the flame flickering up into her face. "Why should you want to know so much

about times and places, or people who were altogether different to you? I never pretended to conform to the formulas of your world. My one desire was to make you happy. Why, then, should I have poured out the tale of my grievances? It is cruel of you to speak to me in that tone of voice."

"Never mind my tone of voice, but give me a straight answer to a straight question. That woman Polly must have counted the cost when she braved the law, and knew it would be necessary to hide herself."

Did she guess his meaning *now*? She looked at him as if she did. She seemed to find something crushing in his plain-speaking, for she sank into a chair, making one more vain effort to turn the tables against *him*, as she said, "It is not like you to make such a fuss about the accusation of a mere stranger—I could not have believed it of you, had you not once before taken the evidence of a servant, turning her into a spy. I have heard of men,

calling themselves gentlemen, encouraging fellows who put their ears to the keyhole, but you, *you*—I thought better things of you.”

At another time he would have been stung by her suspicions, touched by her sigh of weariness, and by the signs of that physical fatigue which made her again lose her self-command. Had he not tended her carefully all the winter, taking his cousin's explanation of her bodily weakness, and blaming himself for his readiness to be alarmed about trifles? But he had never forgotten all that had been difficult of explanation. And now he hardly dared to look at her lest his heart should be moved by the sight of that pale loveliness, with the tears swimming in the appealing eyes. He had begun to dislike her seductive grace, and to look upon the elegance of her figure with disgust. He knew now that he had first been disenchanted as long ago as when he had been obliged to humour her fancies in town.

He steeled himself to a stern rejoinder, “Enough

of your petty concealments and miserable prevarications. I never believe servants or listen to their gossip; I believe nothing but the testimony of my own senses. Speak the truth, woman, if it is possible for you ever to speak truth."

And then it seemed to her that it would be better to have done with pretences; freedom from the burden which had weighed upon her would at least be something. And if it were the hardest fate which a wife could have to endure to speak the truth in a case like hers, she would tell it without extenuating circumstances; perhaps if God were a God of love, as Eleanor had so often represented, the mere fact of so telling the truth might help her to expiate. All this mystery had been most irritating to herself as well as to her husband; perhaps, if she explained all about her difficulties, he would help her to get out of them.

CHAPTER VIII.

POLLY TELLS HER TALE.

MRS. CARLYON began to tell the tale with no feeling of resentment left against Ben or anyone else in the world, and with no wish to justify her own conduct—simply relating the facts. And yet, as she continued to retail the plain story which told so cruelly against her, it was as if every word were wrung from her against her will; and when she stopped to get her breath, Ralph felt as if he stood in a torture-chamber and was accessory to the brutal violence which extorted a confession. He did not interrupt her when she told him of her career as a dancer at the pantomime, and added, when she saw that he winced,

“How could I tell you before, when I found that you looked down upon the profession as you did? How could I let Phillis know that you had chosen to marry one of those children of Satan—not even one who had acted in the higher branches of the profession—but a sort of strolling-player, a woman who, according to you, would already have let her reputation be singed?”

Neither did he break in on her narrative when she informed him of her desire to put the seas between herself and Ben; though—listening to her, heavy-hearted, and with a sort of savage feeling which he could ill restrain—he had nearly exclaimed, “To think that you should stoop like the lowest and basest of your sex to vilify and calumniate a man who had never done you an injury!”

But when she came to the account of Azalea’s death, and her temptation to take the place of the dead woman, her choking sobs, no longer restrained by an effort of will, were shaking her as if with a

nervous spasm. And she could not now resist the impulse to explain—"It could have made no difference—it was really the same. If my friend had lived a minute longer she would have willed it all to me if I had asked her."

Then it was that, after pacing restlessly about the room, he stood in front of her and said, with righteous anger, "What is the use of these sterile emotions, if they bear no fruit in good deeds?"

And when she repeated again, "But you do not understand. The paper was spread before her—she was ready to dictate, and sign, a will. It was all an accident, nothing but an unhappy accident," he cried, "Woman! woman! Call things by their true names, call it theft, call it lying."

By this time the scorching tears had begun to fall. But he was pitiless as he continued, "Who would think that beneath the delicate velvet of your beauty a horror of this sort could remain hidden—that you could be not only untruthful but unreal and utterly

devoid of moral sense? I could have made excuses for you if you had told your tale with that tendency to exaggeration and distortion of facts to which your sex is prone. I could make allowance for *that*, but this is no excusable inaccuracy. You have been living a deliberate lie. You have outraged me, and yet you ask me to believe in you. How can I believe you in anything else now? You have deadened your sense of truth. You have told your falsehoods placidly till you learnt to believe in them; but did you think of the dishonour, the shame, nay, more, the ineffaceable insult that you were preparing for me?"

"It was because I loved you," she pleaded.

"Can anyone be susceptible of love who has sunk to such low moral depths?" he replied. "Did you think of me as a man who respects himself and wishes to hand a decent name down to his children? A man of that sort doesn't touch money which does not belong to him, and does not care to herd with common thieves."

She had never seen him angry like this before;

sparks seemed to flash from his eyes. She knew now she had had the impression that he had been always cold.

She clasped her hands before her face, putting them up to her burning eyelids and pressing them over her eyeballs to keep back the tears. "Spare me," she whispered from white lips. "Your words cut like knives. Let the dead past bury its dead, for the sake of our child."

There was a strange expression on his face as he regarded her. "*Our child?* Have you reflected? I was married to a dead woman—Azalea Deveril. In obtaining the licence I naturally obtained it in your false name, and I was married to a woman of that name." He tried to make her understand, seating himself by her side, but speaking to her like a stranger. "You lied even then."

"It made no difference," she cried. "I am your wife. The church united us and the church must separate us. I have been your faithful wife." And

then, with dishevelled hair and bloodshot eyes, she cried wildly, "Your judgment is harsh and cruel. What can you know of the circumstances? How can you tell what I was then? You, who have only known me as a smooth and prosperous woman!"

Her confused perception of what had taken place, her passion against dogmatism, and the differences of culture which still existed between them, made his difficult task well nigh impossible. "You have plenty of imagination," he answered, in the low, level voice which he was trying to maintain. "Can you imagine what you have made *me* suffer? If I made hasty imputations I withdraw them, but I must think of what is to be done. God help us; we both need His help!"

"There is no God," she murmured, "or He would not desert me now."

He took no notice of an ejaculation which seemed to him profane, but continued, without evasions or roundabout phrases, such as he had condemned in herself, "When you embarked upon a proceeding from

which there was no turning back, and when you thought about our marriage, did it occur to you that an honest man could have nothing to do with conditions which might involve him in complicity?"

She was past answering; she could only put her hand to her head and moan. It was like the moaning of a wounded animal, terrible to hear. It was a tragic dilemma, for Ralph could not betray her, and he had been in some horrible way associated with her guilt. "I mentioned business," he said, in the same level voice; "the money can no longer be mine, and I must give back what I have used. You humbugged me into stealing, yet I was no fortune-hunter. I will be no partner of your guilt."

Her moaning continued.

"It cannot be altogether done through a lawyer; there must be reservations, for the child's sake, as you say. I will tell this story to no man."

She still did not interrupt. He put his hand to his brow and said, "You will see the absolute necessity

of our living separately. I will make you some provision. I will not betray you, but I must make my conditions—you can continue living as you lived before I met you.”

Her passion was roused again. “It pleases you to put me on a different level, to treat me as an inferior because I was once poor. But I tell you, once for all, that I could not live in degradation. I shall be a woman to be shunned—separated from her husband! Do you think I could bear it?”

“We must remember the child.” There was something in his expression as he once more uttered the words, which reminded her that he also was suffering acutely, and which made her guess how he was already feeling that he would rather his daughter did not resemble her mother.

“I am sorry to have to say it, but I *must* think of the child. We are responsible for bringing her into existence. Is not that as terrible for me as for you? The good name which has been ours for

generations should be handed down untainted to my daughter. But I do not suppose that things can be hidden altogether. I cannot undertake to back you up in a felony. (Excuse me for calling a spade a spade.) Neither can I undertake to go shares with you in a deception. It is an age in which people canonize weakness, but I have never been one of those people—never pretended to be. It is of no use for us to argue about it; it would be a sheer waste of vital force," he added, a little wearily, "and both of us are worn out. All I can do is to promise not to breathe a word about this matter. We can separate, and explain our separation—as numbers of people do—on the score of incompatibility. You need not distrust my discretion; I will keep your secret; but people will guess that something is amiss—remember you could have prevented it if you had told me all. It will be better for the blame to be laid on *me*."

It was in keeping with the character of the man that he should deprecate absolute concealment, though

in doing so he forgot the impulsiveness of the woman.

She said something wild, but he answered calmly,

"Divorce is no such easy matter in this country, and we could neither of us wish to get it; you wrong yourself and you wrong me when you stoop to utter the word. But we can neither of us wish to go on living in this lie. It could be no happiness even for you—with all the glamour gone out of life."

She went on urging wildly.

"Had not other husbands and wives to keep up deception in their married lives? They pretend not to do so, that is the only difference," flashed out Polly.

He did not even hear her, but repeated in the same spiritless tone, as if talking to himself,

"All the glamour gone! I was prouder of you than words can say. If you had told me that you were poor I would have worked for enough for us both. I wanted you and you only, but I need you no more. The best thing is for you to go some-

where on the Continent; I advise you—it will be safer for you in case your quondam lover should betray you—to go at once.”

She knew the look of quiet determination, and flinched before it.

“You are trying to intimidate me; you do not really mean it. You admit that I am your wife in spite of the false name. And you cannot separate me from the child.”

“Only for your own good—her good and yours,” he continued, in the same spiritless tone—talking on, but scarcely knowing what he was saying, “I cannot think it all out now, but it seems to me it may be better for you to separate yourself from her for a time, till she is old enough to choose and hear the miserable tale. Stay—let her be with me during the present winter—Phillis will take care of her while you travel, and then—when you have thought over all this—the best way will be for neither of us to claim her—let her go to some boarding-school where they

can treat her kindly, and when she grows up and leaves it there will be time enough for us to decide which of us is to claim her. Meanwhile, be on your guard: you cannot trust that man."

"You can't want to make me wretched and desperate. I am a woman who hates constraint and can dare all sorts of things."

He took no notice of her threats.

"The world is all before you to choose from," he repeated. "Time may do much to heal the wound for us both, and then——"

He did not look at her yearningly nor anxiously, for he was stunned; she was unfair to him at that moment and told herself that he cared little enough for her when his honour was in jeopardy.

"You can spend no more of that money, but I will write to my lawyer, and——"

"Did you think I would take a bribe?" she interrupted, looking at him with eyes in which the tears had dried, but which seemed to glare at him as she

added; "No, I was penniless before, and I can go away penniless, and starve. Or I can meet the punishment which laws, made by men harsh like yourself, can mete out for me. Now that you know my secret, I must, of course, take all the consequences."

"I can only tell you," he answered, more stiffly than before, "that whatever course you adopt, reconciliation between us will be quite impossible. Any attempt to interfere with me will prove disastrous."

CHAPTER IX.

AMIDST THE RUINS.

THE worst moment had come; Polly seemed to know now that it must always have come. The flowers were still budding, and the birds still singing in the garden, but the outward world had ceased to exist for her, when he, who refused to share her shame, left her.

The violence of the crisis had deadened emotion and almost annihilated feeling. Never again could it be between them as it had been before. Never could he unsay his stern and cruel words. All illusion was now destroyed, and the softening veils which had hung about her had been torn down by cruel hands.

Worse still—it was as if the whole building of love, which she had so carefully constructed for herself, had been riven at its foundations in one moment, and had toppled about her with a harsh roar, which reverberated still in her ears, and with dust which blinded her eyes, so that it was no wonder she could neither see nor hear, but sat looking in front of her as if at vacancy when her maid brought up her breakfast—oblivious of the questions which the woman expected to be answered. For it was as if the ruins were cracking, crashing, swaying, and groaning about her still, threatening to crush all that was left of her own existence in their downfall. And nothing remained of her domestic life; her home, the tie between herself and her husband, and her sense of motherhood, were disappearing into the void.

She put out her hand blindly when she found herself alone, and sank upon the floor. How long she lay there she never afterwards knew. The birds were still singing, and the morning sunshine streaming into

the room, glittering on the little silver tea-pot and cream-jug, the eggshell-china cup, the white damask cloth, and the untasted breakfast. Her maid was plying her with salts, and bathing her forehead with eau-de-cologne. Then, for the first time, she remembered that it was still necessary to keep up an appearance of commonplace decorum, and saying that she had determined to lie down and keep quiet, while she assured the girl that the attack was of no consequence and begged her to say nothing about it to Mr. Carlyon, she insisted on being left alone—alone to think, and to acknowledge that she had no right to be outraged by her husband's bitter contempt. Her tongue had been tied, and she had not been able to properly say to him, in the words she had intended to use, if ever the offence were found out, "If I committed a sin it was because I did not know," for she now for the first time comprehended how the consequences of it remained—whether she knew or not—and how sin unrepented still lay at her door. She had lost her

presence of mind, and had not been able to plead. "Consider—it was the simple struggle for existence! You taught me about Darwin and never understood how Darwin's law must rule in the moral as in the physical world. Is it my fault if too many human beings are born into the world, and if there is no provision for some of us? Should I not have been a fool if I had not availed myself of my opportunities?" "Little Dick" would have admitted the validity of such an argument, but her husband would have torn it to pieces. His was one of those exceptionally strong natures, which shared in none of the sympathy of the present day for knaves and criminals. And she had caused him to pass through the most humiliating grief to which a man of his calibre could possibly be exposed; she had forced him to take money gained by questionable means. She had branded him with her own disgrace. The perfidy might not be the perfidy of which he had at first suspected her, but it was a perfidy which left her capable of any treachery. A

woman who every day of her life could live an acted lie was, to a man of his calibre, a creature to be avoided—and perhaps, as she said to herself, he was right—by her husband and his world.

Till now her eyes had never been thoroughly open. She had seen life through an unreal medium—not as it was; she had lived in a distorted dream. She had been angry with the conventional people who had no discrimination in criticizing, and who were ready to detract from others whose temptations they could not estimate. Till now she had not understood either reason or duty, but they stood over her with their scourges at last; they were hard taskmasters. It was as if that last scene had been necessary to make her realize that the offence which she had minimized and been inclined to reason away was ten times greater than she had supposed it to be. She wondered she had never viewed it in these lurid colours before. The web of sophistry which she had woven round it had been utterly torn down, and for the first time

she saw herself as a fallen, condemned creature—condemned not only by her own conscience, but by the verdict of all right-thinking and honourable men and women. Truly, her sin had found her out, for, as it were, in a moment, her life scheme had collapsed, as if one had run a needle into a bladder. A sort of horror at her own degradation—a degradation into which she had dragged the man who loved her—had fallen upon her, were it only for his sake.

So uneducated had she been that she had never, all these years, had any consciousness of being a criminal, amenable to the law. If that horrible thing which had haunted her—that recollection which was like a nightmare—had come to her at all during the happiest time of her married life, it had generally been in the hours of the night, when one who loved her lay by her side. It had never occurred to her till now to think that his honour had been destroyed, and that it was like a stain which could never be wiped out; and more than ever she reproached herself for

her wickedness in thinking of marrying him. Her limbs were stiff when she got up. Everything seemed to rock round her; even her eyesight was affected, and she fancied she saw sparks in the air. She tried all sorts of remedies, bathing her face with cold water, and holding her forehead and eyes in the basin, with the vague hope that it might help to strengthen her. But at last, as the day went on, she collapsed helplessly on the bed, holding the bedclothes round her, hiding her face in the pillow, setting her teeth hard, and forcing herself to lie still, till every muscle was rigid with the effort of her will.

If it had only been possible to exclude sound! But for the sake of appearances she allowed the servants to bring her the food which she found it impossible to touch, explaining again that she had an attack of neuralgic headache, and that her only hope was to be left in quietness. Now and then through the dreary day the little timepiece on her mantelpiece struck the hours, but the sonorous tones of church

bells, suggestive of funerals and midnight services, seemed to have crept into the striking of the tiny clock. She did not sleep, but she lay in a sort of stupor during the night, sleepless, and hearing her husband's footsteps pacing backwards and forwards in the adjacent room. It seemed to her as if the daylight would never come. The air of the early morning, penetrating and cold in the grey mysterious hour when more souls pass to the Silent Land than at any other time of the day or night, crept through the windows, and made her shiver in her bed, quaking, but no longer in fear of the dead Azalea; the dead seemed nearer to her and kinder than the living. She wrapped the clothes more tightly round her, and yet, when the day came at last, she was inconsistent enough to shut her eyes lest she should see the sunlight for which she had longed, creeping slowly into the room and bringing her back to the sights of everyday life. She clutched the pillows tightly, holding them over her ears that she should not hear the sound of footsteps overhead,

reminding her that the servants were preparing for their daily work.

She wanted to forget everything, or at least to have time to reflect. For as yet she was as far as ever from settling the difficult question of what she was going to do. Should she throw herself on her husband's mercy, and leave events to take their course? There seemed to be nothing else to do now that she had let this thing spring upon her, confront her, and overwhelm her in a way which she knew, now that it was too late, she could never have been able to prevent.

Ralph Carlyon also spent the night on no "bed of roses." "The situation is impossible; there is no way out of it," he had said to himself again and again. If the woman who had deceived him had forced herself on his presence or come near to him during that day, he might even have used violence to free himself from her touch; he might have seized her by the wrists and flung her against the door. He was startled

at himself; this desire to vent his indignation on one who was weaker, came perilously near to the longing to hit and bruise which belongs to the savage man, and raises him but little above the type of the aboriginal ape, clawing and biting its next of kin. But an hour or two, in the case of a civilized gentleman who exercises habitual self-control, enables him to master his anger, and the difference could only now be recognized in the hardening of Ralph's voice, and the glance of his eyes, which were like steel. Passion might have served the woman better, but her instinct told her that the present stage of stern disapproval was more hopeless and more difficult to work upon.

For in the interim Ralph had comforted himself with his child. Till the child's touch had cooled his brow he had been nearly crazed with shame and grief, but afterwards, he, too, began to reflect. That which had happened was not *his* fault, though it was a thing which hardened him, and was bringing out the worst possibilities of his nature. The youth which never

lasts long for any of us had, years before, left Ralph Carlyon, but in twenty-four hours he had become old and scarred. His face, in the morning light, was white and passionless, and he had lost his kindly eyes and encouraging smile. He could not forgive the woman, but it was his duty to protect her from the consequences of an act which was the less infamous that she—like Eve of old—had not calculated its full effect.

Before his final leave-taking he had proceeded to make his plans. He could not see her again, pacing about the room and gesticulating in a sort of frenzy of despair. It was humiliating and degrading: no good could come of it. He was firm in his resolution, and yet felt like a brute. He knew that the law had been vilified for giving the father his child, and yet in his present revulsion of feeling he also knew that he could not do otherwise than avail himself of that law. It was a just law, which would enable him to educate the little one to be honest and

true, in spite of the traits of character which it would doubtless have inherited from its mother. If he yielded his rights in this respect, he would only yield in some fit of sentimentalism little better than idiocy. It was his duty in the worst crisis to reserve his power of thinking and acting. To put off a decision of this sort was only to procrastinate or fall into a sort of cowardly inertia, which would allow him to be still further caught in the miserable net of circumstances. He must cut through the meshes at once. He would write a merciful letter, for he had no right to constitute himself the woman's judge. On the contrary, he would tell her that if he could devise any plan in the future for her to see their child, and constantly, he would try to do so.

He never knew exactly how he managed to write that letter, in spite of the agonizing pain which wrenched at his heart. To him, as well as to her, it was as if everything were blotted out, and life itself slipping away. Yet he knew that he could

never have loved her or married her, had he not believed her to be as sinless and modest as a newly-plucked violet. "When the child is twenty-one," he wrote, "she can be informed of all the circumstances, for by that time it may become safe for us to take her into our confidence, and if she decides in your favour—as no doubt she will decide—women do not see these things as men do, I—her natural guardian—shall have nothing of which to accuse myself, either towards you or towards her. Till then, let me entreat you to be patient. *I* shall not betray you, but I must live in poverty in order to be able to restore what I have wrongfully taken; for you have made me your accomplice, and till all is restored the crime will be on my head."

In the corridor he met his sister, who was anxiously inquiring about the state of his wife.

"You must make excuses for her; she is nervous and excitable—it is her constitution," he said, echoing Eleanor's words.

His head was so confused that he did not know what he had been saying. He put his hand to his forehead with a vague impulse of uncertainty. In another instant what he knew might have escaped him in words. But he pulled himself up by an effort. "My wife is going away; it is necessary for her to have a change. You may draw what inferences you like. I cannot explain to you, Phillis—I do not think I shall ever be able to explain—why it is all different, and why we have mutually agreed to separate. But I think I would rather you blamed me than *her*."

Part V.

CHAPTER I.

AT MONTE CARLO.

SOME days afterwards Mrs. Carlyon was on her way to the "Department of the *Alpes-Maritimes*." It had all seemed dreamlike and visionary since she had hurried away from Woodlands. The passage had been rough, and she had remained on deck, with the salt spray dashing in her face, unaware that she was getting wet. To make a journey *en princesse* had at one time seemed to her delightful, but now she no longer cared even for the comfort. She had engaged a *coupé-lit* and had every luxury at her command, but as yet she had only a feeling of hurrying along—she knew not whither. Sometimes she could not even

recollect if there was any definite destination for her journey. It was a strange freak of body rather than of mind, which was inclining her to fly to the sunny south just when the swallows were returning. She could scarcely remember how she had risen and dressed herself on the morning after her final conversation with Ralph, stealthily, without disturbing anyone in the house. She could not pray to God, but she crept into the room in which her husband was sleeping heavily, after hours of unrest, knelt down by the bed, and pressed one of his hands, inert with sleep, to her burning lips.

She managed to keep up appearances in her visit to the lawyer in London to whom Ralph had referred her. She found that he had told him very little, and that, indeed, if the lawyer could have had any suspicion of the true state of the case, Ralph's words would have been calculated to mislead him. Mr. Nugent coughed discreetly as he motioned her to a seat, and read to her from her husband's letter, "I am ready

to knuckle under to any condition she likes to make. There is no occasion for us to divert the world with any account of our differences. We have found that there is incompatibility; I cannot tell you more."

The solicitor went on to intimate as gently as he could—misunderstanding everything, in almost entire ignorance of the circumstances—that though there was no possibility of divorce on either side, her husband wished to humour her in letting her lead a freer life. Mr. Carlyon would give her her liberty, but he had to explain that she would be still bound to him by an indissoluble tie. "The link which unites us," Ralph had written, "has never been broken; and though the news of such a misfortune as ours is always likely to spread, however we may desire to hide it, I have no wish to make our disagreement public—rather to keep it secret in the interest of my child. It rests with Mrs. Carlyon herself to be as quiet as I shall be about the circumstances of our disagreement, but I wish her to understand that I can hold no

communication with her except through you." And Polly, who was thickly veiled and kept her eyes on the ground, remembering how he had said to her, "I was married to a dead woman," felt, for once, that matters might have been worse, and that, after all, she could be thankful to the law.

"I quite agree with him," she answered, in an indistinct voice; it was almost as if he had quoted the unsavoury proverb—"there is no occasion to wash our dirty linen in public."

Mr. Carlyon's object was evidently to spare her name, as well as his own, and to minimize the scandal as much as possible. He had said to himself that theatrical people, to whom, as a set, he had an aversion, were used, no doubt, to stormy scenes amongst themselves, but no such scenes should be repeated in his household, and he was equally determined that there should be no occasion for the world to pry into his private affairs.

Surely, Polly had thought, he would have dealt

more leniently with her if he had remembered the yearning wishes of her youth for some sort of happiness in life—desires which had been mixed up, owing to the influence exercised upon her, with a sort of revolutionary zeal. Never had she been more doggedly inclined to accuse, not the God in whom she refused to believe, but Society, for a cruel conspiracy against women like herself. It was as if all the world had suddenly become black with a darkness which could be felt, and a sense of horrible void; whilst, for the first time in her life, she could believe how all the tragedies had been invented out of true stories about women. Women who did not know how it happened, that the thought of the men who had been cruel to them and were still their husbands, mingled with everything; women who had to go through soul partings which could bring even physical agony! She found it difficult, as the train whirled on, to remember that it was all a horrible reality; it seemed like some nightmare from which she should awake with her

faculties restored. She was less inclined than she had been before to be hard upon herself, even though she remembered that she carried in her pocket money which, according to Ralph, had been stolen from others. She vehemently denied the accusation, assuring herself more strongly than ever that, had Azalea lingered for a few minutes longer, the property would legally have been hers. It seemed to her too bad that when other women could hold the cup of happiness so closely to their lips, drinking their fill and never being grateful, she could not take her short sip at it without suffering so dreadfully. Yet, inconsistently enough, she told herself that in future she would let the money accumulate and would refuse to spend it. That Ralph had determined to shut up Woodlands and had dismissed the servants, was no secret from her; the lawyer had told her of his resolution. It aggravated her passionate wish to gamble at Monte Carlo and so win money on which she could live without further touching the capital.

All these schemes served to occupy her during the journey, but when the train reached Nice, where she had made up her mind to linger, the sensation of having failed in everything in her life—in everything which caused the true happiness of womanhood—came upon her intensified, when she was alone on her couch at night. She determined to treat it like a disagreeable nostalgia which she ought to shake off. That other sensation, with which we are all of us more or less familiar, when the grief from which we are suffering is expunged for a time from the memory by merciful sleep, but slowly returns when we wake, accounting for a sickness of the heart from which it is hopeless to try to relieve oneself, was equally exasperating to her nerves. Why should she feel as if a sword were continually unsheathed before her? Why be forced to look into the future as if it contained nothing but darkness for her? She was young, and, had her husband continued to love her with that admiration and devotion he had felt for her at first,

he would certainly have attributed what he called her crime to an intellectual blunder, rather than to an error of the heart!

A hotel *garni* in Paris had been, in Polly's youth, one of her grandest dreams, and it seemed to her strange that in this splendid hotel at Nice, with the silver, the napery, and the gorgeous furniture, she should be called upon to suffer so much. It was horrible to see the beautiful landscape outside the window and to know that she had ceased to have pleasure in its beauty. The trees and skies were the same, and the roses that climbed against the casements of her window, filling the air with odour, were also the same; so was the tender light on the horizon, like that of a transparent lemon when the sun sank and the twilight came, as Polly sat watching by her window till the milky way, like an illuminated arch, stretched across the sky; but all was different to her—a sort of imitation of the life which was past, as if she were trying to galvanize a corpse into being.

“Baby will be crying for me—I know for certain she is awake and crying.” The bleating cries seemed to be wafted to her across the darkness—she was certain she heard them. It was the first thing which drove Polly to drink. It was easy enough for her to get champagne or Chartreuse—nearly all the women in the hotel treated themselves to the best of wines and spirits. Polly told herself she would only be like the rest when she ordered a bottle of Chartreuse to be brought to her bedroom. The sugary sting was pleasant to her palate; and the pleasant warmth gradually diffused itself through her frame, relaxing the tired limbs, and numbing the power of her thoughts.

She slept at last, relapsing into a state of dreamy beatitude. On the following morning she woke with a headache, but was determined not to let the hopelessness return. “The whole hell of Dante,” a well-known writer has said, “is as nothing in sheer intensity when tested by the night hours of a tortured conscience.” And to sleep without the alcohol taken in quantities,

was to expose herself to that agony. It is so with many of us. When we wake in the night and see things in a less conventional aspect, with the true self stripped bare of all the excuses we make for it, the shivering loneliness of the soul is apt to be unendurable. And when the potentialities of misery are not lulled even in sleep, when vague terrors come upon us, nameless fears and creeping horrors, with the recollection of the irreparable in the wasted years, who is to help us if we cannot believe in the "forgiveness of sins?" In Polly's case the agony was augmented by the recollection of her husband's words, rending her very heartstrings, and always by the hidden fear that the words which she had resented were true words. After a little while she said to herself, "All this is very weak—weak and morbid. The tendency of my mind towards ridiculous subtleties must be combated. I am not a coward; I must be brave. I must live down these morbid horrors."

For was there any good in these self-torturing

pangs? The self-pleasing nature, in which a sense of humour was inherent, was attempting to reassert itself. Was there not another side? Was not happiness to be found in this clear atmosphere, with its luxurious surroundings, amidst the laughter of merry, and sometimes over-dressed, women; with gardens in their tropical verdure, and those other more effective and conspicuous living flowers, supposed to add a double loveliness to the efforts of floriculture? The subtle allurements of the sweet scents, the sharp touches of vivid colour, the aromatic and pungent odours were not lost upon her. Were these attractions to be despised by one like herself? No, distinctly no! "*Toujours gai, toujours gai!*" sang Polly, recalling one of the ditties of her girlhood, as she reached Monte Carlo after one of the loveliest drives in the world, telling herself that as she had been fortunate in London in meeting people with the same thoughts and the same ideas as her own, she did not see why she should not meet with them again; she did not know

why she should be cut off from the joys of social life.

Her spirits grew high after she reached the old Roman village of La Turbie and looked down upon the sapphire sheen of the sea. She was ready to cry out with pleasure as she beheld the mediæval Monaco on its rocky promontory; and on the left, embowered amid pines, olives, and palm-trees, the modern Monte Carlo, the castle of indolence of which she had heard so much, with the lapping wavelets murmuring their lullabies, and limpid in the golden glow of the atmosphere on the adjacent shore. What did they murmur? Surely they said, "Forget. Forget your excruciating pain by leaving yourself no time to think. You are too young to mistrust the future and go on mourning for ever. Grant absolution to yourself." Somebody had quoted Blake's words to her: "They built a hell in heaven's despite," and after a few days' experience of trying her fortune in the shrine of the enchanter, she no longer thought of the beauty of the scenery or of old Monaco on its rock overlooking the

bay of Hercules. But her pessimism returned and vented itself in the bitterness of her remarks. There was no opportunity for her to relieve herself in tirades or furious outbreaks, but, while her storm of wrath still raged within, she rejoiced for the first time in the misfortunes of those around her. She was not the only woman trying her fate with fortune in those gorgeous halls, with their Moorish decorations and fretted roofs—who had made up her mind never to stop laughing or making cynical remarks, lest the tears should come instead. Neither was she the only one who was like some worn musical instrument, in which an important string had cracked and no chord could be struck in harmony.

She was astonished at herself, after the first few days, for her eagerness in going straight to the tables, squeezing in through the portals amongst the hundred or two well-dressed people who rushed from the hotels and railway station at the hour of admission to the Casino. Some few of them kept up imperturbable

decorum, doing things, nevertheless, which would have fitted them for Bedlam.

Polly soon became used to the clinking of the money, the piles of gold and silver pieces, the plush-covered seats, and low-voiced croupiers, with the click of the ivory ball as the brief sentences announced, "*Messieurs, faites le jeu,*" or "*Rien ne va plus.*" She also soon became accustomed to the excruciating politeness and the polished manners with which even rude things could be said, and soon learnt to adopt the rule, whenever she lost, not to go on but to defer the game till the next day, and to keep a smile on her face when the rake of the croupier swept up the last piece of gold she had determined to hazard on a certain day. "Why, it would be a pandemonium," she thought to herself, "if the women became excited; it is a quiet pandemonium as it is." One fancies a circle of dead people looking on—thousands upon thousands, with fiery eyes, as in Rider Haggard's story.

There were many to keep Polly in countenance,

but that did not comfort her in the least. During her brief experience as Ralph Carlyon's wife, she had insensibly contracted a prejudice in favour of respectability. She hated the disreputable people who were around her in this *cercle des étrangers*, drawing unconsciously away from the Parisian *demi-mondaine* with rouge on her cheeks, or the coarse-featured Jewess with diamonds in her ears. She had too long been accustomed to an atmosphere of refinement to avenge herself, as she had intended, by taking pleasure in this society. The language and style of the men and women around her, which at one time she might have learnt to tolerate, now only filled her with disgust.

She even, in her revulsion of feeling, found herself inclined to exaggerate their defects. Their breath, she fancied, reeked of the wine and spirits in which she had herself begun to indulge; the voices were unmusical, the mirth half tipsy. The coarse-looking men who sat next to her at the *table d'hôte* of the

hotel, had not only thick lips, but smelt of tobacco, and the cynical *roué* who sat opposite, toying with his eye-glasses, and dressed in the height of the fashion, was as odious to her fancy as the rosy-faced women with their loud laughter, smart dresses, affected manners, and painted complexions. All seemed to tell a tale of corruption. Polly, in her present mood, was inclined to think that all the worst propensities of human nature were forced into abnormal growth by this mania for roulette.

She would like to have told the men that she had the dignity of her grief, and that no one could interfere with her. She knew little about the game, and was not cool enough to play well even if she had done so. She preferred gazing and wondering at some of the others. At the proper-looking English girls and mothers, who mixed with the motley crowd and were not ashamed to stake their five-franc pieces. At the well-dressed dame with her sealskin cloak and diamond-beringed fingers, with golden hair beneath her Parisian bonnet, who was still young though she inclined to

embonpoint, and who had a husband standing behind her chair and whispering little bits of advice to her, of which she seldom took any notice, as she played impulsively, always on the winning side. The husband's cheeks flushed as her pile of gold increased. But the woman was weary; she had been sitting there for hours; she knew that the *déjeuner à la fourchette* had long been over at the hotel, and more than once she refused to stake another penny—looking up appealingly to the mentor behind. One more stroke of luck, the pile of gold was becoming heavier, and the husband patted her on the back, saying, unabashed, in good English, “Now you may go and have your luncheon.”

“I wish such turns of the wheel of Fortune would come to me,” thought Polly, who had determined to play no more that day, as she busied herself with watching a girl, pallid and poverty-stricken, with dilated eyes and quivering lips telling the tale of highly strung nerves. She, too, was seated at the table apparently against her will, consulting now and then with a

witch-like hag of a mother who urged her on. The girl had kept up her self-control and had been sitting there for hour after hour, with a pathetic patience in the droop of her lips and a pencil between her thin fingers. Now and then, at the suggestions of the Sycorax who was standing behind her, she glanced at her card and marked it. Both of them knew perfectly well how the game had gone for the last few hours, and were biding their time for a decisive stroke. By the girl's side was a little pile of silver pieces and one of gold glittering amongst them; she did not often win but, on the other hand, she staked too little to make her risks of losing serious.

And spots of hectic colour were glittering on her thin cheeks, beneath which the cheekbones stood out. Now and then she coughed a hollow cough, and still the old witch was urging her on.

"She is within an ace of death," thought Polly. And suddenly she grew sick even at the colours, red the colour of blood, and black that of death.

CHAPTER II.

WANDERING.

POLLY could hardly understand how it was that this paradise so quickly palled upon her, since she had chosen it because she supposed that all its attractions united might help her to forget her husband and child. The real Bohemia was hateful to her; it was so different from the ideal one. Theoretically, all the tropical vegetation in the beautiful gardens where the aloes, the date palms, the cedars, and the citrons flourished in perfection, should have been charming to her, but she cared no more for these gardens than for the magnolias and orange trees in tubs which grew in front of her hotel. She sickened of them

all, just as she sickened at the sight of the ivory roulette balls spinning on, day after day, with the numerous anxious eyes fixed upon them.

"It is a bad life for anyone, but worse for me, for I am bad already," she thought with a moan, a cry as of a soul in anguish. She was no longer in a state of hallucination, though she speculated as in the old days, "I wonder that those who have never sinned themselves have no sympathy to spare for the way in which the sinner suffers. Do they know that these bad people are sickened through and through, and that they have always a weight to carry, which presses them down?"

No one knew better than she did that she had no right to turn with loathing against the disreputable women who, no doubt, were her fit associates. Who was she to hate the Lena Despard or the Gwendoline Harleths, with the evil possibilities in their natures, and to tell herself with bitterness that there were women so made as never to know remorse?

Did not she herself belong to that type of women who seem to be born to make men miserable? Most of these others looked happy enough when she met them, promenading when the band played, or seated at little round tables with brandy and seltzer before them, and cigarettes between their lips. Why could not she smile, too?

She did not know that she was made of such plastic material, that her brief association with the Carlyons in her married life had influenced her, and developed so much refinement in her that she had become particular and even fastidious, so that pleasures which had once amused her filled her now with disgust. Neither could she be much influenced by sordid considerations. She felt as if she would rather starve than make money at the chance of causing wretchedness and possible suicide for others. She had more sympathy with the disreputable women who did their best to keep up appearances, than with the ladies who did not need the super-

fluous cash, and who were not ashamed to boast of being able to turn a little at Monte Carlo once a year. But even these ladies were not always *en veine*, and Polly was no longer one of them.

She was painfully aware of the difference when she met them in the "*Cercle des Étrangers*," where their eyes were fixed on the ivory roulette ball spinning on to its destination. "They are obliged to sit down with me at the same table," she thought, "but they would willingly gather up their skirts and pass me by on the other side. The women fly from me directly they know I am not living with my husband, and the men who make much of me are not good men—oh, the cruelty of the world!" It made her turn on Ralph. She told herself that it was *his* fault if she seemed to be a self-constituted, wilfully-chosen grass-widow—how she hated those other grass-widows, with their attendant train of devoted swains! In her vain attempts to reduce her thoughts to a coherent shape, she fancied that her

name would soon be on all men's lips, befouled, dishonoured. "They will think of me as if I am a leper, and make me grow wickeder still," she thought, with a new tendency to hysterical exaggeration not likely to conduce to her success in the game.

She did not break the bank nor have an admiring crowd wondering at her. On the contrary, she lost more than she gained, and her magnanimous intentions of sending back the modest cheques which reached her, from time to time, from her husband's solicitor, could not be carried out. The heroics proved to be mock heroics, and she could not even comfort herself by indulging in them. She had tried to harden her heart against the man in whom she had once believed, heart and soul, but she was obliged to acknowledge that he was still chivalrous, and that though she had deceived him, and lost him in the sense in which she most desired to keep him, he had no wish to visit her sin upon her head or expose her to other people.

The *jeunesse dorée* did not attract her, the elegant

nothings which had once been a great deal to her, the ices and the chocolates, ceased to please her; the sweets and the bouquets of flowers had now become distasteful. She turned her face from the shrewd glances which said so much to her, suspecting her, as her sensitive pride told her, of other sins in which she had taken no part—glances which she felt she had not deserved, and which brought burning blushes of shame to the cheeks of one who had been wont to pride herself on being a perfect wife and an irreproachable mother.

Some of the men never looked at her, but Polly had more interest in the women than in the lethargic figures of those men, with somnambulistic eyes always fixed on one spot. It was not likely that gamblers so absorbed in their ruling passion would take notice of any woman looking over their shoulders, but an instinct warned her to be always on her guard. It was all very well when the game favoured her, but one day, when she had a run of

ill-luck, she saw a pair of sympathetic eyes fixed upon her from one man, more respectable than the rest, amongst the minority of eager players whom she had thought perfectly safe. He came up to her and spoke to her, offering her his purse. She was absent-minded, and too bewildered to recognize him at once, thinking it odd that something in the high-shouldered figure, now muffled in a picturesque Italian cloak, should remind her of a time when she had been accustomed to have cultivated men talk to her and listen to her with an interest which was pleasant—a time when she had been surrounded by pretty things, herself the most attractive of her *bibelots*, and when, in her secret heart, she had not cared much about her popularity—one compliment from the husband she loved outweighing in reality all the rest.

She abruptly refused the offer of the purse, but this, with some other episodes of the kind, woke her from her feverish dreams of possible success, and led her to see the dangers she was running. So she

determined to tear herself away from Monte Carlo, going first to Monaco and then to Mentone. At one time she had even thought of changing her route and setting out for Biarritz, as the weather was warm. But the world of fashion no longer interested her; neither could she any longer endure to see other women happy with their husbands and children, and to have her imagination always on the alert, ready to set to work on the various histories, the joys and domestic happinesses of these other women who had not to sit at their firesides apart.

Her jealousy of these people drove her on to Bordighera, but Bordighera was not only too hot but as bad, and rather worse, with its tribes of English people.

She had visited the south coast of Devonshire when she first came to England, and had delighted to see the tide coming in, like a veil of silver, on the golden sand, pierced with holes and fretted like lace, till the veil retired and left little rivulets behind. By the

tideless Mediterranean one could not amuse oneself with this daily marvel so like the ebb and flow of human life, one could not watch the great continents of sand or shingle lessening into islands, with the islands themselves swallowed up at last, or the lakelets left when the water retreated, reflecting the skies, as if there were another heaven beneath one's feet. She could go to Normandy or Brittany and feast her eyes on this sand, but Normandy or Brittany would not be England. She could not understand this longing after England. There were no herring boats here with deep shadows in wavy lines of browns and indigos almost merging into black on the sapphire sea, but there were yachts of every description like white-sailed birds on the deeper blue, and sails of trading vessels as picturesque as those which went in search of cod and hake or silver herring. And when she chose to listen for it there was even the sibilant sound of the waves washing a golden shore.

But everywhere—here, as in seaside places in Eng-

land—there were stupid people with their conjugal felicity, those other men and women who had never done anything risky or who delighted in each other's society, sunning themselves in the smiles of their children. Or, worse still, there were those happy lovers belonging to the *bourgeoisie*, who sauntered about in lanes with their arms round each other and their faces radiant and not ashamed, not fettered by a false sense of conventionality; they made her remember what might have been.

It was all very well for her to think of them as "stupid" for she felt that, after all, she honoured those "Philistines," as the men in London had somewhat scornfully called them. She honoured and esteemed them—good, honest, self-contented creatures—walking along the beaten track of life, looking neither to the right hand nor the left, and pelting other people with stones because they differed from them.

She wished she had been one of these smiling,

rather vulgar, respectable women, who seemed to have "children at their desire," bringing them up to be good citizens, made of corduroy and homespun to stand the wear and tear of life. In the defacement of her ideal and in the bitterness of her disappointed hopes she thought—oh, to get back to the innocence of the past and to retrace her steps but a few short years!—as so many guilty people have thought before her.

She longed for that Nature which would soothe her, whispering its secrets to her, laying its cool hands on her heated brow, calming the beatings of her aching heart, singing her to sleep with the ripple of its streams and the twitter of its birds, and refreshing her nostrils with the odour of flowers and new-cut hay, and which seemed, after all, to be in England—something like the Woodlands to which she retired before she listened to the suit of Ralph Carlyon. She retreated to the hills for the warmer weather, but when the autumn returned, and storms of wind went whistling and howling, like the cries of lost souls, through the

palm groves and olive woods around her, she longed still more for her fireside at Woodlands. Such weather, they told her, did not come often, but when it came it lashed the sea into fury, and delicate women generally remained indoors, for it was difficult to stand against it. The blasts of wind came as if with the wings of some gigantic bird, rushing against the window-panes, rattling the shutters, which the hotel keepers hastened to close, cracking the wainscoting of older houses, and howling its terrific news into everybody's ears—news which came from over the sea, telling of drowning men and ships in distress.

It set Polly thinking again that had she been less desperate she would not have been content with hiding herself in remote places, far away from the gossip of the world, but would have tried to earn her own living, and that as she had earned it once before, perhaps she might try still. Then her conscience might be clearer, and in due time she might be less afraid of the message brought by the mistral.

It gave her bad dreams now—not only dreams about her little child, for one night she dreamt that she was on her trial before judge and jury, a prisoner in Court. She, who so hated to be stared at with rudeness, had to smile while opera glasses were levelled at her—a poor outcast, separated from human kind, with hundreds of hungry, searching eyes upon her. When she woke, she sat up in bed drawing deep breaths, and not at first able to realize that she was at liberty—but quivering like a child longing to hide itself in its agony of shame. This dream was a proof that she was beginning to realize how the act which she still tried to excuse to herself, might appear in the eyes of others. She had told herself that it was guiltless guilt, and yet she was guilty. She saw herself as in her dream, in her shame and abandonment, dishevelled and weeping, with bloodshot eyes. But as soon as she shook off the impressions caused by that sight, she repeated with redoubled energy, “Women like me must be

happy. We have lived a long time—and yet lived so little—people who have made one little mistake can't be expected to go in sackcloth and ashes for ever."

She would find out something to do, and afterwards she would enjoy herself.

She would go to Florence, where she might try modelling with clay, or putting herself through a course of music lessons, so as to enable her to give instruction in singing. But once at Florence she was so fascinated by all the spectacular magnificence, and by the sweet sounds and delicious sights, that she could scarcely tear herself away. The first time she went into the Duomo the music stirred her to the very depths of her being. She was fearful, she knew not why, of the harmony which quickened her pulses, and made her tremble. It touched some chords in her being which she would rather not have made to vibrate, and when she heard the bourdon swell of the organ, she pressed her hands to her eyelids as though to keep the tears from coming.

She came again and again to the Cathedral, and then, hearing that the music was still better at some of the other churches, she took to visiting these in turn.

There was something penetrating and subtle in these services which pierced her innermost being, sometimes inspiring her with rapture in spite of her unutterable sadness—when she seemed to hear a cry of triumph among the wailing discords—and sometimes rocking her to rest when voices were raised in the sweetest and most comforting of the harmonies.

Polly could well have dispensed with the sermons which were incomprehensible to her, but she felt as if she could guess at the meaning of the fluent Italian from the earnest tones of the preachers, which were sometimes raised and sometimes terrible and threatening. There was one especially whose voice always seemed to condemn her; it grated on her ears, she cowered away from it. She preferred the incense which was wafted through the naves, or the vague sweetness of the music.

One day, when she lingered behind at the Duomo, listening to the pealing of the organ, an old priest, who had noticed her more than once, stopped and addressed her in broken English. The good man spoke to her kindly, but it was evident that, with his long experience of the world, he suspected her when he asked her if she were a widow. For a moment or two she had had the intoxicating hope that there might be someone to care for her and help her in her extremity. She had heard the confessional spoken of as a merciful means of relief, as if an abscess which had been slowly gathering could be relieved by the touch of a lancet and no longer poison the blood of the patient. But the priest's manner, when he asked the question, set her teeth on edge, and she was ready to resent it as a new degradation.

"If I have any trouble it is my own affair, we won't talk of it, please. I do not believe in your remedy, and can only envy the simplicity of these confiding Roman Catholic women," she said, with a touch of

sarcasm, as she shook her head and passed on, with the high notes of the music still pattering above her head but no longer arresting her steps—for she was afraid.

What right had she to cry to the God of justice, or to let the emotions, so long pent up, have full play and her heart expand—just because of the beauty of the paintings and the music?

If there were moments when she became aware of the deadly sinfulness of her deed, there always seemed to be some mocking fiend in the background, questioning the possibility of her repentance. In those moments of dual consciousness, with the old disturbing questions cropping up again, thinking became agony, almost madness.

CHAPTER III.

THE CARNIVAL AT NICE.

AFTER this she avoided the churches, and tried to do what was much more difficult, avoid the thoughts which crowded upon her against her will. For if it had not been easy even in her former happiness to comfort herself with sophisms, and if the criminality of what she was doing had occasionally intruded itself though she tried to dismiss it, her heart cried to her now that if she had done wrong she had been sufficiently unhappy for the wrong to be done away with, and wiped out altogether from her memory. Even these priests believed in the doctrine of Purgatory, which would explain so much that was difficult

to understand, and surely—as she said to herself—she had already been through her Purgatory. The old elastic temperament and love of enjoyment asserted themselves just as they had in former days, as soon as the winter was past and the heads of the apple and cherry trees, crowned with flowers, stooped under their decorations like modest brides whose eyes were on the ground. One could almost sympathize with the pleasurable feeling of the sap running so richly in the branches of the trees. And Polly, who found her efforts not to think impossible, and who was tired of thinking the same thoughts which she had thought a thousand times before, and sick of the same ideas going on monotonously like the ticking of a clock, went back to Nice, hardly knowing why she did so, but probably in obedience to some automatic law which took her to the same place without her will.

Her last few weeks at Florence, after she had ceased to go into the picture-galleries or comfort

herself any more with music, had proved to be intolerable. The storms of wind had not been so violent as those in the neighbourhood of Bordighera, but her nights were restless, and now and then she had been roused by a gust beating against her window-panes. Sometimes it had been like a little child's voice crying, "Mother, mother!" and then she would sit up wildly in bed, pushing the hair from her eyes, exclaiming, "I am coming, darling," and then remember. Oh, the agony of that remembrance! She must try to help herself; she must revolt against it.

She could not go on living in this state of tension; she "could not, and would not," she said to herself, as the train was whirling her to Nice, where she hoped to take up the threads of her former irresponsible life. Nothing was in reality more terrible than that she should lose control over her actions, and be hurried hither and thither, like a creature at the mercy of every emotion and every change in her health.

What about the Carnival at Nice? The Carnival had not interested her at all, at first, when she heard people talking about it at her hotel. But now the desire to have a fling became too powerful to be resisted. Why should she not join in the cancan and dance, wildly and merrily, as she would have joined in it a few years before? Why should she feel as if she had weights on her limbs? She began to be conscious of a sort of excitement in the gorgeous attire planned by other women—her love of dress having never entirely deserted her. Once, indeed, as she remembered, she had been a reckless *danseuse*, and smiled to herself when she wondered if she could still accomplish feats which had roused the applause of enthusiastic audiences.

In this reaction of feeling she told herself that she was sick of trying to be content with the humdrum life of hotels, where the dreadful old British matrons, with side ringlets and big caps and a freezing expression in their stony eyes, would stare at her with stern

disapproval because she talked a little to the admiring foreigners with waxed moustaches who flanked her at *tables d'hôte*, sitting on either side. She knew very well that the old women said, "We don't believe in her. It is suspicious, to say the least of it, that she should be always alone. She just puts on that look of infantile innocence when it suits her." And she hated the dames who drew their skirts away from her, just as much as the men who dared to look at her, not only with furtive glances, but with challenging twinkles in their eyes, as if they knew much more about her than they cared to reveal.

Oh, it was all Ralph's fault—he would have to answer for it if she fell into the snares of the men who were ready to be devoted to her, and whom she had hitherto diligently shunned! Why should she go about looking wretched and long-faced and fighting with her sorrow? Better to forget it!

There would be an opportunity when the Casino was thrown open for the general rout, and when King

Carnival would be on his burlesque throne, with crowds around him. In the old days Polly would have been ready enough to join in freak and frolic, quip or prank or clever chaff. But now, when the time came, she, who had once been so coquettish and light-hearted, felt as if some strange spell must indeed have passed over her that, in the height of all this gaiety, her heart seemed to turn ice cold. It was as if the Fates followed her even in her desire to amuse herself. For on the evening when "King Carnival" made his public entry into the town, followed by a picturesque procession, and throngs of spectators, a triumphal car, constructed of wickerwork in the form of a basket, took fire, and its occupants (seven girls in masquerade dress) could only save themselves by leaping, from a height of several feet, to the ground.

The "défilé carnavalesque," with its various skits upon the latest Parisian craze in hypnotism, the Panama canal, the Fin de Siècle, and the charmers of crocodiles, had very little interest for her after that,

her nerves being in a weak condition and therefore easily shaken. Some of the devices were so recondite that a stranger could not understand them without explanation, whilst other ideas had been done to death, and Polly found that, after all, she was in no humour to laugh at the "faithful Englishman," whose wife had him in reins conducting him round the corso, or the "*Incroyable incroyables*," a cavalcade of twenty exquisites who, looked at frontwise, had all the allurements of the beginning-of-the-century young men—with coats reversed, high collars, satin breeches, silk stockings and curled canes—but who carried their wives on their backs, these fashionables being usually supposed to leave their ladies at home.

It is impossible to laugh at such things—however merry one may be by nature—unless one laughs in company. And the merry throng in the Square Massena—which was decorated by crescents and butterflies hung between Venetian masts, and pink and blue lamps—only intensified the poor woman's sense of awful loneliness.

But her spirits rose a little on the day fixed for the battle of flowers. On that day all was sunshine; the clouds kept out of view, the sea sparkled with jewels, and the wind blew its softest for the month of February. The mere pleasure of existing was not to be underrated in such perfect weather. And though the real flowers were varied by dainty devices—paper double dahlias, confetti, or tiny nosegays attached to big *pouffes* of satin ribbon—still the air was odorous with the scent of blossom, as big cars drawn by horses with flower-decked harness trundled along beneath the balcony in which Mrs. Carlyon was sitting—the first bristling with a fanciful array of arms rising from banks of green ferns and lilies, the second superb in carnations and cornflowers, and the third decked in delicate green tracery with loops and wreaths of yellow mimosa. What ailed her that the harmonies in blue and white or in yellow and green ceased to please her eyes? Was it the old fear of being known and disgraced? For at one moment

amidst the motley crowd she thought she recognized a figure which seemed to be beckoning to her with arm outstretched. The dress was that of a Benedictine monk, with hood drawn over the face. But as it stood still for some minutes beneath the balcony, as if determined not to be drawn forwards by the swaying motion of the crowd, and with only the eyes visible beneath the hood, throwing a *bonbonnière* and bouquet of lilies in her lap, there could be no doubt that she had been singled out for some special attention, and she began to be terrified. It took but a little to frighten her, but she continued to look.

"I know no one here; it is all safe fooling; I am quite safe," she was saying to herself. And at the same instant the monk, who had still not followed the cars or joined in the ordinary sport in the street came a pace or two nearer and drew off his hood.

It was the same figure which had alarmed her at Monte Carlo—the figure of a man, slightly deformed, gazing at her from his heavy-lidded, half-closed eyes,

as he was accustomed to gaze at most women, as if they were psychological curiosities. Suddenly the recollection, which had been vague, took form, and she withdrew from observation. "It is Mr. Dangin himself; I might have expected to meet one of them. People who write, and make their head-quarters in London, go about a good deal. Well, what does it matter?"

Nothing in her present mood seemed to matter. And the meeting with the literary friend, whom she and her husband had jocularly called "Timon," deciding that people who pretended to be cynical were *poseurs*, did not seem to her sufficient reason for cutting short her little fling of pleasure. She reminded herself that she had come to the Carnival for the purpose of enjoying herself while she concealed her identity, and that it would be absurd to allow anyone to interfere with her enjoyment.

She decided that she must take the risk of coming in contact with Mr. Dangin when she dressed herself,

a few evenings afterwards, for the fun in which she had determined to take part, fearful of so much of her face as could not be concealed by the domino, and wishing she could cover up her tell-tale hair and chin.

"I mean to enjoy myself—why should I be a coward? There is never any enjoyment for me now in my life," she said, when she felt inclined to give it up, and retreat from the fuss and excitement to her own apartments. For during the last few days she had found the din in the crowded hotel and in the streets unbearable, the strange vocabulary and the contest of wits intolerable. And the masked ball at the Opera House was not likely to suit the fastidious tastes she had imbibed from Ralph Carlyon.

It was characteristic of the strange contradictions in her nature that, before she ventured on her new experiment, she found it necessary to fortify herself with champagne, and yet she hated it all—herself, the champagne, and the Carnival which came in for

a large share of her contempt. It could not give her what she wanted, and she was in that state of mind when everything, even when it is innocent, produced a sort of nostalgia. She had tired even on the first day of the noise and bustle, the clatter of hoofs and tinkle of bells—tired of the panorama of gaily-dressed, living flowers flitting continually across her vision. That sense of utter loneliness in a crowd, and that cold shiver of uneasiness when Mr. Dangin's dark eyes glanced so familiarly up at hers, had left her nervous and almost irritable. For she remembered now that she had allowed him to devote himself to her when they had been in London. It had been noticeable at the time, but she had considered it perfectly safe in the presence of her husband. Now that she was away from Ralph and that scandal-mongers had no doubt been busy with her name the matter was altogether different. She was fearful of mingling in the motley throng lest she should be seen. And very soon she found that her fears were

far from groundless. She was certainly dogged by the man who was slightly deformed, but who had now managed to conceal his deformity by a black velvet costume, with sleeves, slashed with satin, cut high on the shoulders. If she had had any doubts of his identity before, all uncertainty would have been dispelled by his telling shake of the hand when he managed to find his way into the box where she had been sitting leaning over the cushions, but weary of the rackety scene, which had become like a nightmare to her. She was no longer looking at the surging crowd or listening to the rhythmic cadence of the dancers' feet, their cries of pleasure or their shouts of laughter. But she felt it to be a piece of impertinent interference when he seated himself beside her with the air of an old friend, and said, in carnival fashion,

"Why do you avoid me? Unless I am greatly mistaken we know each other well. You are running no risk in talking to me. You need not mind me. I'm not a talking blockhead."

Throughout all his researches and psychological experiments, he had disliked the idea of experimenting on the feelings of this particular woman. Something about her was sacred and safe from his clinical experiments. Long ago he had discovered that she resented his flatteries, but there was another way of flattering her—by hinting at the independence and originality which charmed him, and when he had adopted this style of conversation he had been rewarded by her tolerating smile. If he had thought her a pretty child, like the rest of her sex, to be enmeshed by compliments, he was mistaken, but he liked power, liked to think himself important in the world and to be supreme with women. Suddenly he recognized that this woman who was said to be separated from her husband, was more or less in the power of anyone who could lure her to make imprudent confidences.

And she had always been imprudent.

Through the holes in her domino her eyes flashed

at him, and he heard the soft rustling of her dress as she rose and got to a safer distance in the semi-darkness at the back of the box. She had an excuse for doing so, as the floor of the theatre was now covered by masked and hooded people whirling round and round. The noise of the orchestra was almost deafening, and as the serried crowd went swaying to and fro, the dust which floated about reached many of the spectators who were leaning forward in their velvet-cushioned boxes.

"I do not like these allusions to the past any more than I like the dust, or the dazzling glare of those chandeliers," she answered in a nervous, jerky voice. "What is your object in coming after me?"

It was a little puzzling for him to answer her. For he was one of the people who pretend to be indifferent to gossip, but who let it soak into them all the same. "Who can help it?" he would have said, "the evil thing is of a moist character and penetrates like a Scotch mist. No umbrellas can keep it out. You

may draw your great coat up to your neck, and stuff your ears with cotton wool, but it penetrates all the same."

"Separated from her husband!" that was the sort of thing which had already got about. She had brought it on herself, in her readiness to tell of it in the few letters which she had written to friends in the neighbourhood of Woodlands, when her despair had reached the climax of desperation. Carlyon would have been more guarded, but to the few to whom Polly had written she had shown herself in her true character, an impulsive, reckless woman.

"What fix had she got herself into now?" had been Dandin's first query on hearing from the recipient of one of these letters. He prided himself on having nothing to do with the chatter circulated in clubs and mess-rooms, as well as in drawing-rooms at confidential afternoon teas, but he equally prided himself on his intuitive insight, and the Carlyon of old days had never seemed as if he could be suspected of unworthy

jealousy. But Timon, as he had been so facetiously called, though he prided himself on his intuitive insight and did not think that very much could be wrong with this woman, was also well aware of his credulity as to evil. "It is the wicked reports," he would have said, "which are mostly true. Oh, we're a bad lot, and we admit it in the fashion of always believing what is evil about each other!"

Now that he had caught this interesting specimen and shown that he knew her—and probably knew all that was known about her story—it was not his intention to let her escape him.

Was it not the occasion for a combat of wits, for a momentary lifting of the velvet masks, for the opening and shutting of the doors of boxes, and for men to be in search of adventures? He had ceased to believe in the women who were, many of them, bandying jokes and elbowing their way about that theatre, and though in London his tongue might be tied, he was not so cautious as when he was in London.

He looked better than usual, almost handsome, in spite of his high shoulders, with his domino floating behind him, as he said in a voice which was no longer disguised, and so insinuating that she did not at once resent it,

“You should get rid of this melancholy languor—it does not suit you. This is no Inferno, it is Paradiso—the land of fragrant flowers and of seductive grace.”

He had not at first believed all the wild nonsense he had heard about her leaving her husband. But he believed it now. She had evidently carried her point and left him, as she had said in her letter to her friend. He was the more inclined to believe it, not only from the story and the subsequent scandal, but because Carlyon was not the man to give his wife her head in a place of this sort.

There was something fierce and unnatural in her usually cheerful voice, as she repeated in her despair,

“Why do you come after me? It would be kindest

for everyone I have known to leave me to myself. The curtain has fallen over my life; my husband cares for me no longer. They say women never know when a man has ceased to love them, but I am an exception. I have nothing to live for."

It was one of the imprudent speeches which he had expected, but he was too shrewd a man to take advantage of it at once.

"Upon my soul, I believe you will be happier without him," he said, between his clenched teeth, and then she saw that she had been unfortunate in her hasty acknowledgment.

He did not credit her wretched little assumption of innocence. He felt sure that she had decoyed some fellow by her coquetries or Carlyon would never have separated from her, and this growing conviction gave him courage to say to her,

"Be happy and enjoy. Why all this bravado? Thank Heaven I traced you here. I saw you before, at Monte Carlo. Once seen, no one could ever forget you."

She took no notice of the latter part of his speech, but answered the question by saying, "Oh, I am so tired—so tired with it all! What are dress, or even flowers, to me any more?"

"You may be happy; you are still young, still beautiful. It is morbid to talk of your life as ended."

She said something in awkward phrase, and then there was an interval of embarrassing silence.

"Will you let me extricate you from your difficulties?"

"They are not difficulties from which you could extricate me. I tell you that I can never explain anything about them. You will never know anything but that I have made a wretched hash of my life."

Dangin reflected again—so far as it was possible for any man to reflect in a moment of intense excitement. He, who prided himself on his intuition thought he saw it all. He decided that the husband was selfish and unappreciative, that he had not got it in him to find out the finer part of his young wife's nature.

"The girl has been badly brought-up, and is a strange compound, but there is much that is noble and charming," he added mentally.

"They were all in love with you in Town; it was a sort of general massacre! What has he done to you?" he said aloud, between his teeth, "to reduce you to a state like this? Was it for *his* sake that you refused to get into the swing of the London season?"

Again he reflected. Now and then she had flirted, in her own way.

"Married people often have these squabbles and make them up, like children."

"Ours is not a squabble which can ever be made up."

Once more his suspicions gave him courage. The face which she had called sardonic was close to hers now, and she felt as if a magnetic hand was tightening on her wrist.

He could not pretend that he really knew very much about her. But he had always seen, as it were, behind a veil, a personality which seemed to him real, delicate, and yet free. His curiosity had been awakened by

this free nature ; he did not want to frighten her, but he was glad of an opportunity for making his inquiries. Here at Nice or at Monte Carlo it would be as if a new light were turned on her. Presently he said, "You have resources in yourself ; you can read and you can talk. Let me introduce you to some of my friends who will value you."

"No," she answered, quickly. "I used to *seem* to be like that, but I did not care much about it. I pretended to care because it pleased them, my husband amongst the rest. Books of themselves have no power to amuse me." And then she told him more than she intended, by adding. "My life has been too tragic—too comic, if you will. It has engrossed me. I have no thoughts for anything else."

"Try again," he entreated, putting his arm round her waist and endeavouring to push up her domino, "Have thoughts for me." In that moment he saw a sudden, hollow look about her eyes, and a contraction of the lips as if she shivered, but he continued,

“You belong to him no longer. He has given up all right to call you wife. I must help you to retrieve your life—you must not wreck it further—I have worked and mean to work—I——”

She sprang back as from a poisonous thing. “I had borne everything else, but that it should come to *this!*” was the cry which astonished him.

And even when he ventured to add, in a tone which he meant to be half comic and half tragic, “Everything is fair at a *bal masqué*; I am only fooling,” she escaped him a second time, finding just sufficient strength to mingle with the crowd outside her box. But she was thirsty and heated; the theatre seemed to be turning round her, and the walls closing in upon her. A suffocating, strangling sensation was clutching like a cruel hand at her throat. Her limbs refused to bear her weight. She wished to move out of the place and could not. There was a little sensation in that corner of the crowded place; one of the ladies had fainted and had to be carried into the open air.

CHAPTER IV.

BROKEN DOWN.

SHE was broken down, and shut herself in for days and nights. And then, when she realized that her hotel was too expensive for her and that her little fund of money was becoming exhausted, she moved to cheaper quarters. Here she hoped to be safer and less noticed. For that which she had thought to be an allowable warmth of feeling, an acquaintanceship which might culminate in helpfulness and friendship, had quickly shown its cloven foot. She was afraid to venture out lest she should encounter the high-shouldered figure with its rapid way of walking, which was characteristic, as were the spectacles, the some-

times cynical and sometimes intent expression of face, the wavy chestnut beard, and the eyes glistening behind the glasses.

Once only she had met him, and had found him, as before, difficult to shake off. For he pretended that he had only been acting at the ball, and it seemed to be wisest to take him at his word. He spoke to her about her health and rallied her on her solemn air.

"Say it was a pretence, a mask like that you wore at the ball, when you talked to me as you did—and then fainted because, as you said, you had tired yourself out. It could not be real—you are not the sort of woman to reproach one for nothing—you, who can mourn so for a man who has behaved badly to you and never cared for you!"

"Is that what the world says?—that my husband never cared for me?" she asked, quickening her pace. "Then the world *lies*."

"Why do you look so scared?—people must say something, if you give them a chance to talk. With

such beauty and such talent you might rule the poor world you are so ready to abuse. You need only a little more audacity."

There he touched home, and she answered in self-scorn,

"I thought so once, but then I was a child. The world is a Juggernaut which has ridden over *me*."

"You are not much more than a child now."

"It is not so much the quantity as the quality of the years which have passed over one. I have lived hard and I feel prematurely old."

"If I asked you to confide in me—if I offer you such a friendship as Michael Angelo offered to Vittoria Colonna, Dante to Beatrice—you need not be afraid of it. Let me advise and help you. By your own admission I know the world a great deal better than you do."

And he began to talk as in the old days, when she had thought his talk clever and it had pleased her to listen to it. What was there for her to trouble about if all he said were true? He himself was a determinist, never harassed by doubt. Re-

ligion was but a form of intellectual measles, playing upon such emotions as appeal to sensitive women and undeveloped men, and such emotions were unnecessary. A woman was but a child of larger growth, intended to bloom in the sunshine and to suffer as little as possible. As to what was called sin, it was a misfortune—in the blood—a consequence of heredity—and the part which education could play in modifying criminal tendencies was an incalculable part. Criminals should be studied as unfortunate beings, and classed in the different classes of curable and incurable, but when all was said and done it would still remain a question of how far a premium should be put upon unfitness. As to marriage, it should be barred by State restrictions, and it was doubtful how far it should be binding upon individuals. But whilst he liked to amuse himself discussing these questions, he could partly guess at the sick dread and bitter anguish in this woman's heart, by the evident fact that every now and then he trod on dangerous places.

That she should take her suffering in this concentrated form was interesting as a study of character, but it was unfortunate, for, as he pointed out, a few days and hours of such concentrated pain might kill. That his own talk in past days should have helped to make her unhappy was a possibility he never considered.

He did not remember how widely young Mrs. Carlyon had opened her eyes, nor how eagerly she had listened when he and the other so-called wits and philosophers who had gathered at her house, discussed with superior smiles that disintegration in religious belief which was already taking place and was but the commencement of dissolution. They had thought she did not understand; but they had forgotten that she had dabbled in all sorts of books and could join at times in their conversation.

"I cannot bear to see you melancholy; it is a jarring note in a character like yours—you are born for the sunshine," he said, looking at her, from old habit, as if he were studying her. "I know that some

people hold that the claim of the marriage tie to be unalterable, would—even admitting that men invented it—be the best for the character. But looking at it in another light we shall see that it is a relic of barbarism—dating from the most cruel times, when the subjection of women was a part of the savage code of all nations. We are emancipated now. Every woman should be free, no man should have the power to bind her. She——”

“I do not want to hear.”

She had risen from her seat, and he was alarmed by a sudden glimpse of a pale, tearless, desperate face.

„No one can advise you as well as I can,” he said, tenderly, yet a little angry at the thought that he could kindle no answering spark in the object of his present interest.

But she cried passionately,

“Pray do nothing of the sort. I prefer you in your old character.”

“As a friend always interested in you?”

"I thought so once. I know differently now—you were simply a cynical acquaintance. You liked to analyse me as something new—vivisect me—oh—don't be alarmed, I have caught up all those words—I couldn't be in your society and not know what they mean! You would transfix me with a pin, and put me writhing under your microscope, and it would not matter what became of me—body and soul—when you had finished your experiment. Oh, you do not mean half you say; you are not so bad as one might think—but—I prefer the subjection of women!"

The colour came into his face, for she had sunk into her chair again—and was huddled up in it with her face averted from him, sobbing passionately.

"You completely misunderstand me—but if you think my friendship boring?"

"I think it an insult under present circumstances—remember my husband trusted you—he supposed you to have your scruples," she answered, as soon as she could speak.

It was possible that she overrated the danger, but the very thought of a so-called friendship with a man who took advantage of her in this difficult crisis, was horrible to her. Here in this strange country they might not call a spade a spade as they did in England, but the commoner sorts of wickedness had always been revolting to her. At this rate, as she said to herself, she might "go under" in more senses than one. She recognized the possibility with a shudder. It was as if her desire to be angry with a man who had dealt sternly, but justly, with her had been drenched by a cold douche, and anger with Ralph no longer took precedence in her mind over other and better feelings. She longed for the love which had purified and shielded her, keeping her life from shame, just as she longed for the open moorland, "windswept," and with all the pageantry of cloud, and for the fir trees standing up erect and tall, near that which had once been her happy home in England.

"What would be the good of my going back to

plead with him? He cannot bear the sight of me any more," she moaned to herself, though in the next instant she thought she must make him understand that it was renunciation and not indifference—a sense of the desperation of the situation, or of inflicting punishment on herself, which had led her to submit so tamely to a proposition that she should go away and leave her little child.

The desire to return to England was fast becoming a craving, as difficult to resist as that other yearning sensation in her throat which made her indulge in more Chartreuse than was good for her. That longing for the gaunt trees, swept still by bitter winds, with something austere and even melancholy in their beauty, instead of this tropical vegetation with the aloes and the date palm, the cedars, the pine, the citron, and the olive, became as intense as her longing for her husband and her little one. Her imagination exaggerated the beauty of the fir-woods with glimpses of blue hill, where in summer time she could gather

such simple weeds as the white stitchwort, lad's love, and sweetbriar, instead of the magnolia and orange blossom with their too cloying odour. And the sight of the blue sea with its light-winged ships and its violet horizon had but one tale to tell to her, that of getting back to her baby, and pressing its downy cheek once more to hers.

"Did I say that I thought children were a nuisance, and that the French ladies were the wisest who put them out to nurse?—that was all a way of talking, just to see how Phillis would look," she said to herself as she recollected that it was a miserable tangle, and that her husband had pleaded with her to submit to the best for their child. Perhaps Ralph had been right, cruel as it seemed. For she could not drag the child down to her own depths. The possibilities of evil were no doubt latent in her child's nature, as also the possibilities of good, but the good blood which ran in her husband's and his ancestors' veins might counteract the stain in her own; she would not will-

ingly have bequeathed her temperament to her daughter.

"Oh, why did he explain all this to me—why did he tell me about Galton's theories? If ignorance is bliss why—oh, why do they try to make women wise?" thought Polly, as she asked herself what could be the use of unavailing regrets.

"I think I love him more than ever," said the woman to whom ignorance should have been bliss, lying with her tear-stained face buried in the cushions of her well-furnished bedroom.

What right had she to continue living in that hotel—she, who could not make money, and who was only being dragged down day after day by continuing in her sin?

Ralph had, indeed, constantly sent her instalments for her necessities, through his lawyer, but she had sometimes sent them back again, with the passionate reiteration of her determination never to take a farthing from him.

"He has not sent lately," she thought to herself,

"he, who should have been my natural protector, has lost his right to protect—he leaves me open to the insults of every stranger. It would serve him right if I were really to lead a life of adventure. Summer is coming on. I might go to Baden or Spa, or Homburg, or Schwalbach. There would be men who would follow me in the wooded walks round Homburg, or on the pretty hills round Schwalbach, and I should have to avoid them there as I have avoided them here. Or I could pick and choose." Then she raised her flushed face. The hateful throbbing moment, when the devil in the name of revenge made such a suggestion, had passed, and another purpose leaped half formed into her being. "I will go—I will tell him all. Because I have broken one commandment I have not slain everything worth living for, and he need not suppose that I would play fast and loose with another."

"I am afraid; I am afraid," Polly repeated to herself, as she rose and bathed her tear-stained face,

"I cannot dare stay here. We women are so easily influenced. We take our tone from our surroundings. We are impressionable; we are impulsive. I have been a different woman at different stages of my existence, according to my health, my ignorance, or my knowledge, and the differences in the people about me. I am two different women now. In Hell I should soon be hellish, in Heaven I should be an angel. Nature meant me for an excellent mother and wife: and *now!* All women have two sides—the evil part of their nature may be laid to sleep, but it is there, it is *there!*"

These excitable thoughts were maddening, and she could share them with no one. She was a woman who naturally craved for sympathy, and there was no other human soul with whom she could consult. More than ever she found the difficulty of lying quiet in her bed at nights, in the restless state of her mind. When sleep did not come to her, and she thought she heard that little child's hands tapping at the

window-panes, and the little voice crying, "Mother! mother!" she would rise and take a stronger dose of brandy or Chartreuse, welcoming the tingling warmth through every limb, preceding the blessed period of forgetfulness. And when the morning came there was the same desire to wake herself up, and to gain some power which would help her to endure her life—the same wish to stimulate her palate, which rejected the food it was possible for her, with her limited income, to afford. Her spiritual and mental impressions were growing weaker in consequence of this habit. The time had passed when she had been conscious of liking to kneel in the Roman Church when the censers were filled with incense, and the wonderful voices of the choristers led her to shed penitential tears.

"Confess! What was she to confess? She had done nothing so very wrong. She had enjoyed her life a little, and tried to be good in spite of the one offence, and the cruel Fates had dogged her and dragged her down!"

She would pay her debts and she would go. It was not exactly that she had made up her mind never again to touch Azalea's money, but that an invisible power seemed to keep her from touching more than what was perfectly necessary, and she shivered at the thought of the grinding millstones of those invisible forces from which there seemed to be no escape. At last she understood that it was useless to rail at the universal economy and the natural constitution of things: it did not make any difference, however much she railed.

Some people, as she knew, did not believe in a God, and talked as if their bodies were only collections of chemical atoms. Well, what did it matter? She had known the extremes of human joy and grief, but for her there could be no hope of reunion with those she loved, even if there *were* another life. She might, perhaps, believe in a God, or learn to invent one, if she listened to a child's guileless prayer; she might believe in goodness or forgiveness,

if little hands could be pressed on her heated brow. It was then that the irresistible longing once more to see her home, came to her as an instinct that she was unable to resist. It seemed an eternity since she had been away from it; the thought of it drew her as if by a spell. The rattle of the wheels, and the thud, thud of the steamer on her journey kept time to the tune singing on in her heart, "My child. My little child wants me and I am going home!" The railroads were hardly fast enough, though, in consequence of her refusal to touch the money which did not belong to her, her dresses had grown shabby, and she had to travel second-class. She could not eat during the journey, but the habit in which she now daily indulged was deadening her brain and numbing her senses, so that hardships were lessened for her. She saw nothing very plainly. The sun blazing down on the farmyards, little homesteads, and the oak trees, which were so characteristic of England, were as invisible to her as the line of foam on the

water had been when she sat on the deck, shivering in the cold and silence. The motion of the train, with its rapid oscillations, keeping her from sleep, the moving panorama and ever-changing scenes, all added to the confusion in her brain, and to the reiteration of the one dominant idea, "If she could but see her child and touch it, feel its little arms round her neck, and kiss its little face, rosy with sleep!"

She could not bear to suffer, and it seemed to her that she had already been through æons of suffering. Surely the sin she had committed must be expunged by this time? One pays for everything of that sort to the uttermost farthing!

She had seen these things in her girlhood in a different way—as if through rosy glasses. Was it now, that she had grown older, as if the colouring matter in her eyes had changed? Oh, that one could keep through life the hallucinations of childhood!

* * * * *

At the same time that the tidal train from Dover was carrying its passengers to London, Ralph Carlyon was sitting alone in a little house, almost a cottage, in the neighbourhood of the larger house which he had once owned. He called himself a working-man now, acting as agent to the estate which had once been his own, with the idea of paying back a debt which lay heavily on his conscience. The hatred of all humanity, which was continually surging up in his heart in spite of his better nature, his suspicion of everyone, and his disgust even at beauty, had led him to accept this post in preference to a secretaryship which had been offered to him in London. Here at least he had his liberty, and could afford to make restitution, and here he could shut out everyone when he pleased.

There was a rattle at the handle of the door, and a child's cry for admission. It was his little child's voice which roused him from his reverie, and soon she was climbing on his knee, encircling his face

with her soft fingers, dragging his hand down from his eyes. "Poor—poor!—hegache!"

His first impulse after he had decided to separate from the woman who called herself his wife, was to send the child away also. Would she too grow up to be one of the bedizened women with coy ways and furtive smiles, fooling men to their destination? But he put off the evil day. And when the infant grew old enough to notice him, with little arms which were sometimes wound round his neck, and when the cooing voice was in his ears, he was unmanned by his grief for the first time since the truth had come upon him, and unable to carry out his resolution. Some spring seemed to be broken within him which had helped him to control his anguish, and the rush of blood to his head was relieved by the tearless sobs which shook him as he held his little daughter to his breast.

It was useless to accuse the nurse of teaching the child, for whether she were taught or not, the *rôle* of

comforter seemed to come naturally to her. She grew accustomed to stroking the hair which was prematurely streaked with white, to pressing her tiny hands on his heated forehead, and saying, "Poor, poor!" in the same patronizing and dulcet tones which she was wont to use for her sick dolls when it became necessary to give them physic.

Surely some greater trouble even than a quarrel with his wife, as people said, must have happened to him to account for his strange choice of an occupation, the lonely life he led, and his odd misanthropy! There was not much talk in the neighbourhood of Forest Hill after Mrs. Carlyon's disappearance. There was no hypothesis on which people could build a satisfactory theory. The best part of the matter was that Ralph Carlyon had not lived sufficiently in the world to be exposed to those horrid little paragraphs in the Society papers, or those whispers in club rooms which might have made him feel murderous. His instinct told him that the more he hid

himself in the country the better. His little daughter was the one treasure left to him for which he seemed to care. She was forward in her attempts at speech, and whenever he came in he would nurse her on his knee, and repeat words to her in the deep voice which now sounded forbidding to many other people. His hair, which was so strangely turning white, framed a face which, with its piercing eyes, arched by black brows, compelled strangers, as by a sort of fascination, to turn again and look at it. The same change which had passed over his face had affected his figure. He, who had been generally so erect, suddenly stooped, almost slouched. He had peculiar theories about his daughter. She was to be educated more like a boy than like a girl; especially should she be taught to avoid a woman's temptation to coquetry or deceit. So far did these theories go that he explained he would rather have the child grow up ugly, than with a woman's fatal gift of beauty; and he was accustomed to make himself merry at the

expense of those artists who lived by the eye, attracted rather by the outward form, than by internal harmony.

Phillis was no longer with him. She had been shocked at the change which had passed over her brother, and by his resolution to be content from henceforth with a little house, a little patch of ground, the moderate conveniences of life, and his own library loaded with the favourite books which had been brought from the Hall. All his ambitions had suddenly disappeared. He was not a man to lead a forlorn hope, and declared himself quite deficient in that wonderful faculty for absorbing the wealth of others, which might have enabled him to pay off the mortgage on the estate. As Phillis lamented, "he did even wish to pay it off." It was all, as she added, a mystery, even to herself. Ralph had not generally been "close;" in fact, in the old days everyone had declared that his liberality was absurd. But it was impossible to guess what he had done with his money, whilst the only information which he could be induced

to vouchsafe was, that he intended to devote the remainder of his life to sober culture and the study of nature, as well as to educating his child.

“As if a man ever could educate a child!” said Phillis, with a sniff of disapproval.

And sometimes she would add to the people whom she knew best, “Whatever has happened to him I do not know, but has it struck you that he is not really so stern as he seems to be? Some shock has affected his brain.”

CHAPTER V.

A FORLORN HOPE.

MEANWHILE Polly, who had arrived in London by the tidal train from Dover, caught another train without delay which would take her to Forest Hill. It was as if the same occult force which drove her away nearly a year before, not only from England but to the place where she could lose her identity amongst others who were worse than herself, seemed to be driving her back again to the house from which she would willingly have remained absent. She did not wish to be forced to sit in judgment on herself, and here she would again be brought in contact with people who would certainly sit in judgment on her. Vaguely

to know that she had been separated in some odd way from her husband, even though it might be without a legal separation, would be sufficient to fill prudish people with horror about her, for accusations which were vague were always the worst to bear.

“They will call me a bad woman—an odious woman,” she thought, as she drove to Woodlands, hoping that the caretaker who had been left at the lodge would be able to give her information as to the whereabouts of Mr. Carlyon. But the caretaker was out, and the gate was on the latch, for there was no one to look after her, and it was evident that she had taken full advantage of the situation.

The twittering of the birds had long since ceased as Polly went up the gravel walk, the slanting sunshine had given way to twilight, and most of the windows of the house were shuttered. On one side, however, the shutters of the French windows which communicated with the garden were but imperfectly closed. They yielded to the pressure of Polly’s hand as she

touched the hasp, and in another moment they swung open, revealing a full view of the familiar room through the long plate glass windows. She was touched, she scarcely knew why, to find that the room remained exactly as it had been when she last vacated it. If now and then it had been dusted and swept, the furniture remained unaltered. Even the guitar, with its strings now broken, lay on the table exactly as she had put it down. One of her own photographs in a velvet frame, the last one she had had taken, stood in a prominent place on the table, and a heap of faded flowers, the last she had gathered, lay together, undestroyed but turning into dust.

It was scarcely likely that these things could be so by accident; she recognized Ralph in what would otherwise have been a mystery. Probably it was in consequence of his orders that even the flowers remained untouched. The love which would not be controlled or made to listen to reason had possibly betrayed itself by those few touches, in spite of the

apparent hardness of the man. A recollection of the happy time when their life had been passed together in perfect harmony, contrasted with the wretched existence she had been dragging out in the Riviera, swept over her and made her turn away, remembering that the twilight was passing into darkness. She averted her eyes from the birches and beeches and the little boat on the tiny piece of water, with the chain growing rusty. It was long since she had thought sentimentally of this retirement in the country.

Everything was much more backward than in the Riviera. The oaks with their naked branches adorned only by reddish buds, still looked dark and forbidding; it would have needed the genius of a Millet, or of an artist like Corot to bring out the poetry and harmony of the sleeping landscape.

The wind blew too freshly and made her shiver. She shuddered as she drew a little faded cloak of fashionable cut, but quite unfit for the night air in England, more closely round her. She felt as if she

were dying of thirst, and the craving for some stimulant again took possession of her. But she had determined to resist it, her brain must be clear for that one sight of her child, and for that interview with her husband which would unavoidably follow.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MEETING.

SHE had to consult more than one person as to the whereabouts of Mr. Carlyon, and was thankful for the darkness which concealed her from the eyes of those who would otherwise have recognized her.

It was necessary to dismiss the trap she had taken from the station, lest the sound of the wheels should attract attention, but in paying the driver she was compelled to use some of the few last shillings she had left in her purse. This did not startle her. Nothing startled her. A desire to accomplish her purpose, and another accompanying desire not to disgrace her name, but to keep up her dignity in the neighbourhood

in which she had once been honoured, left no room for the existence of other thoughts in her mind. Physical feelings, however, insisted on asserting themselves with the consciousness that she was hungry and thirsty, and very tired, so tired that her legs seemed to be giving way beneath her, and refusing to support her before she reached the little house.

All was dark in the lower part of it when she approached it, but there were lights in the first-floor. A side-door was open. She crept in, and concealed herself in a small room on the ground-floor, determining to throw herself on the mercy of the servants and to tell them plainly who she was, should her hiding-place be detected. Once, the sound of a baby's laughter and the deep bass tones of a man's voice reached her, and maddened her with regret and despair. It was Ralph, who always paid a final visit to his child after the nurse had put her in her little crib; the little one's coaxing and endearing ways making him gentle and yielding to her, however

unapproachable he had lately been to others. The glee in the child's eyes reminded him of the fun he had sometimes seen dancing in the eyes of his wife. And if he had never guessed that the house could echo again with peals of silvery laughter, still less could he conjecture that every sound of that merriment would be agony to a poor soul listening in the darkness.

Polly, who had never before experienced the feeling of jealousy, tasted it now to the full—rivalry of her own child, and of her husband for the child's sake. He loved the child best, but the child was all in all to her. Oh, the agony of yearning, oh the ache, ache—she felt now how ridiculous it had been for her ever to suppose it could go on unappeased for ever! The maternal feeling conquered; the yearning, indeed, became so desperate that she lost the power of taking precautions. She had a vague idea that there were voices and steps all around her, and that it was becoming too late for her to take care. The beating of her heart was so loud that it seemed to drown the

sound of Ralph's feet descending the stairs. Then, when he had shut himself into the adjacent room, she seized her opportunity, and taking off her shoes crept up to the infant's bedroom—treading as noiselessly as she could up the creaking steps, and holding her breath as she came round the bend of the staircase. The light had been lowered, and the baby left to sleep. All was so perfectly quiet that Polly could hear the sound of the nurse's breathing in the next room. She tried in vain to call gently to her, tell her who she was, and take her into her confidence, but her voice was choked in her throat; she felt as if she could not even whisper.

Another alternative was to creep to the jet of gas, putting it up and waiting to see if her child would recognize her. It was an absurd hope, and her sense of the crisis was so overwhelming that, after she had let more light into the room, she lost her presence of mind, and stood wringing her hands at the door as if she had forgotten the very existence

of the baby. It was not asleep, but cuddling a doll in its crib. With one glimpse at its little innocent face the questions which tormented Polly began again. She knew nothing but what Ralph had told her of heredity or environment, but she dumbly felt that her husband had perhaps been right, and that the child should be allowed to grow up without difficulties in its life. But Nature had its way. At the sight of the strange lady standing at the door in pale and terrified appeal, the little one looked at her with roused, wide-opened eyes. She caught it up and held it convulsively to her bosom as if its warmth would permeate her shivering frame—cooing over it and then holding it up to her neck, as if it were a dove to be caressed.

It was frightened and began to cry, and the nurse coming in uttered a shriek. In another moment a man came striding up the stairs. "What is all this about?" he asked, in cold words.

The figure of the stranger was at first sight hardly familiar to him. The beautiful flower which had been

the joy of his life was crushed, soiled, and discoloured; nothing could restore it to its pristine loveliness, he could only gaze at it with a shudder. Polly did not look like her former self, with a sallow complexion, worn and travel-stained, and a bar drawn by suffering between her brows. Her lips were warped, her expression changed, and a network of wrinkles drawn, as if by a fine pencil, beneath her eyes.

He felt a pang of remorse, when, recognizing her at last, he saw how pale she was, and noticed the dark circles as well as the premature lines on the face. "What do you want of me?" he asked, softening a little, though her heart went cold at the formal question which told her that even now he thought more of his wife's treachery than of her love.

She had not expected that he would confront her so suddenly, and she reeled back against the wall, covering her altered countenance with her hand, as if to screen it from observation. Oh, this agonized shrinking when she ought to have been most brave!

"Lea!" he exclaimed, in a stifled voice, her bowed face and trembling hands appealing to his pity, so that he made one step towards her, drawing back again at once. It was as if the sound of his voice had suddenly penetrated her heart, waking recollections of the blessed days when they had been all in all to each other. The eyes, red-rimmed from want of sleep, welled over with tears. Where was the beauty he had once admired?

He saw that the nurse was looking on in astonishment, and added more coldly, "Come down with me to my study; we can talk better there."

The ice in his manner chilled her again; it was as if the cold penetrated to her bones. Yet she followed him mechanically; had she not known that this would happen? He closed the door gently and motioned her to the sofa, when they reached the room, the walls of which were lined with his books. And once more what she saw contrasted with the sternness of his manner.

For her portrait hung above the mantelpiece; and

the whole of her past life seemed to pass before her, of which the portrait remained as a memento. And many of the little trinkets which he had given her and which she had refused to take with her, lay on one of the smaller tables. Even the brass bird-cage which contained her own favourite canary, now a little yellow ball of feathers, had not been given away. Its songs had once echoed in their favourite sitting-room at Woodlands, and she remembered how she had been accustomed to sing snatches of tunes back to it. It was like an apartment sacred to the memory of that slain affection which was all that remained of what once had been. Otherwise it lacked feminine touches and looked almost uninhabited, the newspapers and periodicals lying about and giving it an air of masculine habitation—"The Nineteenth Century," "The Contemporary," and "The Fortnightly" supplying the need of intellectual conversation on the topics of the day, from which the recluse was now excluded.

He waited for her to speak, but his face did not

look encouraging. For the storm which had passed over his life had risen from the heart to the brain; his love had not only been destroyed, but his illusions were dispelled with it. The philosophy of which he had stood so much in need, had been of little service to him in the desperate crisis of his life, and even his conventional religion had proved futile when his whole being had been convulsed with anger, and when a want of charity to his fellow-creatures had deadened his faith in God.

He motioned her to the sofa, but she refused to sit down. It was as bad as she had expected. His face had aged as well as her own; he walked like an old man: he looked at her as if he did not see her. Yet his manner was singularly calm, as if he had prepared for all emergencies, and had calculated on the possibility of her returning like this, and it was the manner of a man who had made up his mind. He stood looking at her for some moments in that strange, reflective manner, as if he did not fully take

in her identity, and then finding himself compelled to speak first, he spoke in a constrained voice. "Why do you steal into the house like this, and at this time of night? It will cause the scandal I hoped to prevent. I am not resentful," he tried to explain. "All I require is to be let alone; I appeal to my rights as a man."

He did not even now notice her quivering face. The cold chill which had been lessened for the moment by the touch of the baby's face was creeping again through her veins. A sensation as of ice was at her heart; she felt as if she would rather be killed than have him look at her like that. Twice, thrice, she made an attempt to speak, and then the voice came, husky and unlike her own. "And I appeal to the rights of humanity. Expose me—make the matter public, but give me back my daughter."

"What you ask may be right. From one point of view it might be the best for both of us. But have you considered? It might kill you—the shame, the

publicity—it would mean a public trial—it would mean—imprisonment.”

“It cannot be worse than I am suffering now. You are to stay at home and I am to be driven about like a wandering Jew. I might as well have been divorced. I am ready to go to prison.”

“You do not really mean it.”

“I am sure that I do not deserve it. If I committed a sin, it was like a sin which was outside me and did not corrupt my heart.”

“Think of the child,” he said, “and the consequences to her. I do not ask for mercy for myself, but our daughter must not grow up with a name that has been stained.”

“I *do* think of her and I demand my child,” she cried again, passionately determined to fight for her own. “I thought I could give her up for her own good, but I find I cannot keep to it—it is cruel—I cannot.”

“The child, yes, the child must still be a link between us, just now I cannot decide; the shock of

your sudden appearance makes it more difficult. But I acknowledge your right and will give due consideration to it—you must have opportunities of seeing your child.”

He spoke like an automaton, scarcely knowing what he said.

The coldness of his manner exasperated her—she fancied that she saw an involuntary shrinking from her, and she cried—her thoughts no longer centred in the child—“Oh, my God, my God—you never cared about me, but I love you still! I am so tired, the world is so empty for me! Couldn’t you guess that I longed to see your face, and hear your voice? I wanted you, oh, I have wanted *you!*”

“It is hard for me to believe that,” he said, turning away his face, “when you sought your pleasures amongst people who had loose ideas of morality.”

“If you mean Monte Carlo—and if false reports reached you—what did it matter whether I went there or not? Everything I had done would have been

certain to be misconstrued. What did it matter?"

"When I set you free I meant to give you a new start in life. I thought you should have a chance of being cut adrift from your old surroundings--and what use did you make of the opportunity?"

"I had no opportunity. By your very action you had deprived me of that chance and caused me to be suspected. A wife and not a wife--and yet so young!"

"That was your own wild thought. You could have hidden yourself where you pleased--it was your own wild words which betrayed you."

Again that dazed feeling, as if her brain were becoming numbed passed over her. If her reason were giving way perhaps it would be for the best; she could then be responsible for nothing. And she laughed bitterly, for it suddenly occurred to her that she could frighten him.

He was shocked at the threatening laugh and at the meaning which might be concealed in it, just as he

was shocked at the ghastly face, with its girlish gaiety for ever gone from it! He was too conventional and highly bred to make excuses for a fierceness which had been hitherto unknown to him, but which now—when she was a creature at bay—seemed to ally her too closely to the elemental man, in his grosser and more passionate nature.

The eyes which had grown too large for her shrunken face seemed to burn like coals of fire, as she exclaimed,

“I will cry aloud and claim my lawful place. I am your wife.”

It was on his lips to answer,

“You obtained that position by false pretences. It was the result of a cruel wrong to me. The part which you acted was calculated to turn love into contempt.”

But he forbore. Some of the words which she had uttered awoke the protective feeling in his heart, and altered as she was now he could not help

remembering the infinite beauty of her charm and her varying personality.

He had begun to look at her with a glance which was becoming interested. The strained, fatigued expression of her face, and the violet stains beneath the eyes, which heightened all that remained of her now plaintive beauty, appealed to him as nothing else could have done.

He watched her pityingly, but he was steeled against her. It was, perhaps, because he too was tired, but he felt as if he could have nothing to do with such a fevered, unnatural existence. He could pity this woman for the wrong-doing which had brought about such a hateful result, but he could not take her to his heart. He had formerly condoned faults in her which were simply those of folly and girlish ignorance, but this was a crime which according to the law of the land would have to be expiated; he could not be associated with the crime.

“If a woman goes out of bounds, she has always

to suffer for it, and her husband with her," he thought, with a wan smile, as he remembered that he had always hated sensation and melodrama.

His face was pale and determined, but his passion was not less than hers though it was quiet. It was at white heat as he reminded himself that it was his duty to play the man and shorten the agony of this interview.

"We have canonized weakness; much of the sympathy of the present day is for criminals," he repeated to himself, as he answered, "I am ready to make great concessions, but you know that what you ask is impossible."

She could not guess at the miserable, aching tenderness which was filling his heart, but which he was resisting, as he continued, taking pains to speak clearly, though his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth, and, bringing out the words one by one, which fell like molten lead on the remnant of her hopes—"In sinning against the laws of society you

murdered our happiness. Do not persevere in your request—for—God help me!—I do not know what else to say.”

“ You have been listening to things people said about me in my absence,” she cried, with the sudden impulse of trying to defend herself. “ Because I had failed in one way, was it to be supposed that my character was to bear *everything* they chose to pile upon it?”

“ What,” he answered, “ had I to do with other people’s opinions? As it was impossible to speak out to them, it was only natural that they should theorize. Do you suppose for one moment that I should let them speak against you to *me*? Whatever you may have done you are the mother of my child. I have never allowed you to become the target for bitter tongues. There has been one of my difficulties—it was my duty to protect you.”

His words had an effect which he had not intended, for they reminded her of the tender passages between

them, which, so far as he was concerned, had become things of the past.

She made one step forward, but he saw in time that her impulse was to cling to him, and to fling her arms in her old loving way round his neck—perhaps to hang there, weeping bitterly; and he changed his position, standing a little farther off.

Exasperated by the absence of any answering emotion in his face, the features of which were colourless, but set like those of a marble statue; longing to shatter that impassive mask which hid the true self from her, and to break through the chilling manner, she threw herself at his feet. “Let me come and be your servant, the nurse of my child?”

“That also is impossible,” he said; “the lifelong sight of you would only remind me of the ruin of our hopes.”

“Ah, do not say ruin,” she wailed. “Is there no such thing as building them up?”

“I do not believe in it. You cannot revive the

dead. You cannot restore the decay. The only thing which remains for me in life is not happiness, not peace, but the preservation of my self-respect. You have done your best to lower me, and drag me down to the depths with you, but a man cannot be lowered, even by his wife."

The old idea with which she had formerly buoyed herself up, that society had an unfair habit of heaping all things together as if they were equally bad, and not considering circumstances or extenuations, came upon her as his reproaches stung her, and her soul cried out against it. Once more she tried to stir him by those arguments against the injustices of society, which had had such effect on her in former days. "Oh, remember she was my friend—she would have given it all to me! I did not know any better. I thought I was justified in taking what she would have given me if she had lived a few days longer to make her will. I thought I had a right to protect myself against a world which threw me in the power

of a man I hated. I wanted to get away from him—to put the seas between us. I did not mean to marry anyone; you know I did not. And then, afterwards, when I would help you, and when I loved you—oh, how I loved you!—I had no power to hold out. You call it justice,” she repeated, “this way of treating me in my extremity, but it is revenge—revenge, because you hate me for bringing dishonour on your old family name.”

He did not contradict her, remembering what a great philosopher had said about wild justice.

But she was appealing to the wrong man. His horror of those mad theories, which would demolish the barrier between right and wrong, and his stern condemnation of the “Hydra of Social Revolution,” steeled him against them. He sickened at the sound of her coaxing words, for his heart had been poisoned against her—his love had turned to bitterness, and he could no longer bear the sight of her degradation. He hated himself at the recollection of how he had

once loved her. Love or hate, he hardly knew which it was now, in the confusion of his excited brain, as she lay at his feet.

He only felt, in a confused and desperate way, that nothing could bridge over the differences between them. It was with a sense of horror deeper than he was able to understand—as if a gulf were fixed between them—that he seemed to listen to her as to the moans of a poor lost spirit.

“Is my good name, my repute amongst my contemporaries, my duty to my ancestors, nothing to me? You have shamed me already, and I refuse to let you shame me further,” was all he could add. And then as she lay prostrate and penitent, she wept. Had she devised it to touch his heart, no more pathetic form of weeping could possibly have been tried. The slow, patient tears stole down the colourless cheeks from beneath the eyelids, which were now closed in abandonment to her utter weariness. She made no more passionate appeals, but a sound as of suffocation

convulsing the delicate throat told of the effort to restrain the violent sobs.

One glance at the piteous wet eyes might possibly have melted him, but—Heaven forgive him!—he turned away his own eyes. All the pride in his nature—pride of birth, pride of righteousness, the sense of fitness and propriety peculiar to the air he breathed, and the heritage, as he considered, of every well-born Englishman, prejudiced him against her. That this woman—an outcast, and even a felon—who lay at his feet, lowered to the very dust, should call herself his wife, and outrage by her very presence the dignity of his home and hearth, was an ignominy not to be tolerated.

“Get up,” he entreated, trying to speak gently; “this comedy was played out months ago; it was never more than a melodrama, on your side at least, and it will help neither of us to try and revive it in the old Adelphi form. For Heaven’s sake don’t lie there—the servants may hear you. You know that in the

eye of the law, pleas of this sort would avail you nothing—your conduct has dishonoured me and our child.”

He did not add that he was sometimes harassed by hideous doubts as to whether a woman, whose whole life had formerly appeared to him beautiful and harmonious, but who now had proved herself to be a deceiver, might not be a deceiver in many other things, but his heart was steeled again, and his manner implied it. He only said, veiling his eyes with his hands, “It would be madness for us to attempt to come together again. Happiness which depends on purity, on truth, and on an unsullied past, could never follow on such a wretched beginning. You would be miserable; I should be miserable. I could never place the slightest trust in you.”

“Oh, Ralph, Oh, husband,” she pleaded, without opening her eyes, or making any attempt to dry the slow tears which were still falling down her cheeks, “I am telling you the truth, as I would tell it at the dreadful day of judgment.”

"You lied to me before; you lied all through."

"So Heaven help me, I will lie no more again."

"I want none of your protests. I have had enough of your concealments, your lies, your subterfuges," he answered, speaking out of the bitterness of his tortured heart. "I loved a woman whom I believed to be good and true."

"Ah, you do not know. Your world was not as my world. It came to me as a new temptation that you would never have known," she said, raising herself to a kneeling posture. "Forgive me, oh forgive me, for the sake of the child. Oh, remember I was so helpless, so bewildered, so untaught. Sometimes I have asked myself, 'Did I really do it; was it a dream or a fit of madness, or was I really responsible?'"

"At any rate nothing can undo it now," he tried to say philosophically, "and you have never felt the shame and remorse of it till lately, you have only just begun to realize it," he added, still speaking of her

as if she were something foreign to his experience, though she was his wife.

"No, if I had I should never have married you. I resolved, as it was, not to marry anyone, but it was not in human nature to keep to the resolve."

There was a ring of truth in her assertion which seemed to be a relief to him, and his heart nearly melted as she continued, "I loved *you*—only you, and wished to lead a better life, and the door seemed to be open to me. Oh, Ralph, hear me!"

A deep silence ensued, broken only by the sound of the sobbing which she tried in vain to control. Now that the tears had come they streamed down unheeded, possibly it was this fit of weeping which saved her reason.

But it was terrible for the man who listened, and who felt—as he heard that sound of pitiful weeping and strangled sobs—a stab as if from a knife, and yet would not allow himself to make an exclamation.

The man was at his wits' end. How was he to

make her understand that he did not forsake her through cruelty, but through principle? Had it not been a matter of right or wrong, he might perhaps have been tempted in this moment of extremity, to shelter her in his strong arms against the obloquy of mankind. He would have dared anything for her sake—anything but wickedness.

He had meant her to suffer for her sin, he had felt coldly and angrily towards her; but his anger had half abated, softer thoughts had set in. "Get up," he said, still more entreatingly, leading her gently to the sofa, and making her sit down, "I bear you no grudge. I forgive you. If you were dead to me from the time you deceived me, *I* am not your judge."

"You tell me that you are not my judge and you condemn me to martyrdom," she said at last, in a voice so slow and strained that his own, as he answered her, seemed to catch the infection of her despair.

"Do you think that I too shall not be condemned to that martyrdom?" he asked. "It is my duty to

do what I can to throw a veil over what has happened, for the sake of my family—still more for the sake of our innocent child. Was ever man so torn in sunder by conflicting duties? You have a claim upon me, but you deceived me, and I could not live with you again without running the risk of dishonouring my child, and injuring my own apparent respectability.”

“I have heard,” she said, in the same low tone, becoming more and more difficult for his ears to catch, “I have heard that in underground Russia, amidst the afflicted Nihilists, people will commit more serious crimes for the sake of doing good.”

He continued, taking no notice of the interrupting remark, “Have you ever reflected that your conduct has obliged me to choose a course which, under other circumstances, I should have declared to be cowardly and dishonourable? If giving myself up to justice as accessory to a crime would help me at this wretched juncture, without implicating you or injuring my inno-

cent child, I should not hesitate, as you know. But I am caught in such a net as I never thought could have existed."

A few minutes before, his anger at the sense of his own impotence and dishonour would have mastered him. He clenched his teeth insensibly, and knotted his hands together, as he stood silent for an instant in an effort at self-control. Then, asking, "Do I not make myself distinct?" he fetched a glass, which he held to her lips, while he said, "Drink this; it will help to steady you. For your own sake you must not be ill now, and you must not speak of this before the servants."

The very contact of the hand which she loved beneath her neck, where it had so often rested, helped her to drink it, though she had begun to hate the smell of it. It was brandy, and reminded her of other forms of degradation at which he did not even guess. She refused to eat, but when the brandy revived her strength she recognized, to the full, the horror of his

concluding words, and the hopelessness of her last entreaties.

"*Did he make himself distinct?*" The question sent all the blood in her body tingling to the face which she now attempted to hide from him, with that sickening sense of hopelessness. "O, why had she not held out, in spite of the weariness of her hungry waiting?" was her exclamation to herself, as in a revulsion of feeling she dragged up her tired limbs and stood confronting him. "In spite of what you say I am truly your wife—your faithful wife in the sight of God. At the bottom of your heart you must acknowledge that I am so; but you have proved yourself hard and cruel, and I have no regrets in leaving you. Yet I demand to see *my child!*"

The last words escaped her like the shriek of a wounded animal, as she gazed at him with burning eyes: "*My child, my child!* Justice! what a cold, hard idea you have of justice!"

He, too, found it difficult to repress the throes of

anguish, but betrayed them only by a twitching of the lips ; otherwise he did not move a nerve or muscle. "I forbid you to see her again," he said, in the tone of severity which he had before adopted. "Nothing can justify you in imperilling the happiness of the child. If I seem to proceed to extremities it is because you force them upon me. The conditions may appear to you hard ones, but it is necessity which dictates them. I ask you to submit to them for the child's sake."

He went on to explain that anything which could ameliorate her lot he would willingly procure for her. If he could be permitted to make a little provision for her, or set her up in any way for the earning of her own livelihood, so as to screen her from further temptation, she might always count upon him. He hinted at these matters as delicately as was his wont, and he spoke in a tender, pitying way ; but not for one moment did he deviate from what he believed to be his duty. He had said these severe things, and

he meant them, but he had suffered more keenly than she knew from the reproachful expression of those sorrow-stricken eyes.

"If I must go at all let it be *now*—it will be harder for me than being turned out in the morning," she said, passionately as ever, when she found him determined.

"It shall be as you wish—if you will go to the hotel for the night," he answered gently, remembering the wild throb of his heart which had echoed to the child's startled scream, and not wishing her to terrify the child again.

And then he listened. All was quiet, the servants were in the kitchen, and the kitchen door was closed. He looked into the hall. All was dusky and silent; it would be easy for him to let her out as she had come, and then to account for the visit and the disappearance. She was very much altered and no one had seen her closely.

CHAPTER VII.

AT REST.

It was all over; all hope of counting on the affection of the man who had once loved her. Better so, she tried to tell herself with bitterness, if her very presence made him think that the place was contaminated! Better that she should bear the agony alone! If he had cared for her at all he might have taken pity on her when at last she determined to leave him, and when he saw her feeling for the door like one who is blind and half paralysed, so violent were her emotions.

He must have known that she was smitten with momentary blindness, when he had seen her groping for the handle of the door, for he came to her

assistance, opening it courteously for her, and standing bareheaded afterwards in the cold wind, but he had not urged her to change her mind. "Take care of yourself," he had said gently, "it is getting late for you to be out, but you know where the hotel is—quite close. I will inquire in the morning."

He had never been guilty of roughness, never of lack of refinement, and he showed that he was careful of appearances for her still. Could she have guessed the whole truth she would have known that in her absence he always took her part! However much his sterner sister might abuse the woman who bore his name for leaving him and spoiling his life, he had always stood up in her defence. However impossible it had been for him to explain the circumstances which separated them, he had always declared that it was his own fault, and had reminded Phillis sharply that many a poor outcast was worthier of Heaven than other canting, Pharisaic hypocrites. "It is women," he declared, "who, by their bitter

suspicious, drive other women into the outer darkness." And then he had added, to himself, "I am afraid most women do get spiteful as they grow older, and pride themselves on telling the malignant truth." He had not yet recognized what he was doing himself. He did not think it *his* fault, if the day of reckoning had come for a sin in which he had to bear much of the punishment.

That punishment seemed to be bitter enough as he stood at the doorway, hiding his face in his hands that he might not notice the staggering walk of a woman, the rhythm of whose light footsteps and the grace of whose every movement had once been a matter of pride to him.

The interview had been as agonizing to him as to her.

If he had only said, "I cannot help it, whatever you may have done I love you and will be faithful to you still," he knew well that she would have thrown herself on his bosom. But he had been restrained by

all his strange terror of disreputable scenes, of passionate entreaties, and he had known that to say such a word would have been to set a spark to the tinder which was there.

Still, when he remembered how meekly she had said, "I was never worth your loving," he felt it would have been more gracious to have added, "If we were loved only according to our worth it might fare ill with most of us."

The words had been very near his lips. And yet he tried to congratulate himself that he had not given way to what he called his folly, or let it betray him into expressions of tenderness.

"We must both of us try to do for the best; you must not allow yourself to break down again," was all he had said, sincerely and earnestly, as he led her down the stairs.

It was difficult to be well pleased with the part he had played as he turned back, with a thumping of the heart which seemed to be almost audible to his

own ears, whilst she, unknown to him, continued to stagger towards the railway-station, instead of going to the hotel—her groping hands, which needed someone to guide them, touching empty space, and her own heart feeling as if it would never beat with warm affection for anyone on earth again. She walked as if driven by the wildness of her remorse, though her physical powers were exhausted. Her soul, tense with bitter feelings, was unable to enter into any subtle speculation as to the forces which had overmastered her all her life, and were overmastering her still. She knew that she had made a mistake in visiting Ralph, but her passion had driven her to go to him, that passion which, since her girlhood, had come on in such fits of frenzy. It was the fever of the homeless animal—the unhoused vagabond—which drove her on *now*. On, on, on, by train back to London, and then, if possible, to end it all! The suggestion had come to her in much such a formidable way as that other suggestion which had worked such misery in

her life, and which had been like the impulse of a disease; she still found it hard to hold herself accountable for what had been done in that hour of madness.

Her limbs were so tired that she could scarcely drag herself along, but she knew she had not enough money left to enable her to take a conveyance to the station. Had not Ralph Carlyon supposed that she had plenty, and that she would probably put up at the hotel for the night, he would have insisted on putting his own purse into her hands. She laughed aloud, as she thought that it would have been some slight satisfaction to have refused to take it. She was conscious through all her suffering that she would rather have lived with this man, even in strife with him, or in subjection to him, than have queened it with the adoration of any other human being. But he must never know how heartrending the separation had been to her. She had loved him and loathed him with all the vehemence of her passionate nature, as he had stood listening to her wild entreaties with

that strange expression of disapproval. She had tasted nothing that evening, though she had not told Ralph, or of course he would have set food before and fed her, as he would have fed any other outcast hungry woman. And now she had no appetite. The shame, the misery, and the awful disappointment had taken away her desire to eat—and even to think. She wished it were possible to make her mind a blank. For she had no memories to be proud of, every recollection of her sullied past was an added agony. People passed her, and turned back to look at her; they could not see her face, but they could scarcely help remarking her limping walk. She noticed them not at all, or only noticed them in a vague way, thinking, as people in misery are apt to think, of all the other human beings whose struggle for the mere necessities of existence is taken up day after day, and feeling that Nero's plan was possibly the best when he wished, in his madness, that myriads of human beings had but one neck that the problem might be solved of strangling them.

“It would be best not to be—best not to be!” moaned Polly, finding herself still in the grasp of some strange, bewildering, overmastering power and yet fighting against it as by instinct, and seeking—as was natural to her—for some alleviation. “I acted as my nature made me act,” had been her excuse from time to time. But now, all the ideas with which she had deluded herself were seen in their true light to be diseased and visionary, the suggestions of a foul fiend. The devastating flood had carried away everything—honour, safety, husband, child. There were no landmarks left; never could her life bring forth flowers again, never could she help herself by determined resolve. Anything to calm the fevered pulses and disordered nerves!

It was quite dark now, and rain was beginning to fall. The huge trees, which looked leafless and black, like the masts of great ships, stood upright round her in the gloom. The crescent moon was riding in and out amidst the clouds, shedding the pallor

of her wan light on the puddles of the road. It was cold, and Polly was trying to get some warmth into her body by stamping her feet and chafing her hands. A long strand of hair escaping from her bonnet, hung below her waist, and she did not know it. Her boots, fashionably made, fastened with numerous buttons according to the fashion, were splashed and muddy, her garments were dragged and miserably insufficient for keeping out the bitterness of the night air. She could not bear to raise her face, lest it should be irradiated by the light from the moon that had fallen on the black masses of cloud. In her own opinion she had never been very beautiful, and she now considered that even her prettiness was leaving her. She was perfectly aware that she had gone off a good deal during the last few suffering months, but she wronged Ralph when she concluded that the want of her former comeliness had much to do with her loss of favour in his sight.

And then she began to feel as if she could not bear the pain much longer; for it was as if it were

stamping on her like a giant foot, and crushing the life out of her by slow torture. And that insane longing to brave the end and find the solution of the problem of her life, plucking the heart out of the mystery, and finding out the worst—came upon her, as it comes upon most agonized human beings.

If the terrible punishment of a death-agony could in any way expiate, she felt at that moment she would be ready for it. But it would be better to try and steep herself in the water of Lethe, where she could have peace from the stinging conscience which so constantly fretted her, better to sleep off the pain, to have no more anguish, no more oppressive memories. How infinitely better! If she could only know forgetfulness, that her brain might not continue to spin on, weaving wild fancies in this hour of darkness!

There was a little chemist's shop close to the railway station. "They will be less suspicious here," she thought, "than they would be in London."

She drew her veil down, and went into the shop

coughing. The paroxysms seemed to be excessive, and the shopman looked rather compassionately at her as she asked for morphia lozenges.

"Well," he said, as he wrapped them up into a little package and labelled them poison, "those are the best for a cough, but you must be careful not to take more than one at a time."

She took her place in a third-class carriage back to London—she had not money enough now to afford a first-class ticket, or even a second—and, leaning back in a corner, she now and then fingered the little package which lay in her pocket. If she could have courage to take several of the lozenges, and if her death and the description of her body were reported in the papers, her husband might come and kiss her as she lay dead. He would probably shed tears over her and canonize her in his memory, like one of the sinners who are sainted when they are no more. Her quiet lips would never confess to him again, nor her still eyelids open to disclose terrified

eyes. She would lie with an unheeding smile, and he would kneel down by her and forgive her. Waking in that other world, she would understand what he perhaps could not tell her here—how he had loved her with an unabated affection, and how the very strength of that affection had made it impossible for him to forgive her in the way she wished, on earth.

Yet her flesh was weak, and she had, after all, too great a terror of the awful change to be inclined to challenge the black moment by any wild act of hers.

All that was sensuous and pleasure-loving in her nature supplied her with counter arguments. After all, if she *were* to forget, the grave would mean annihilation ! That was a thought which made her heart stand still, and her brain whirl round as if she could not grasp it. Polly was not naturally a pessimist, and she was still so very human—so full of life, and the desire for a little enjoyment in it—that she was inconsistent, as she had ever been. She remembered, poor egoist, how once, when she had been a little child, she

had tried to realize how it had been possible for the world ever to exist without her, and how, with the want of logic of a child, such a thought had made her head giddy even then. The instinct of life was as intense as ever with her still; so long as life lasted there was still a glimmer of hope—some day Ralph might be reconciled to her.

Strangely enough, it was still her great love for him which had much to do with keeping her from the desperate act. For as long as she was in the world Ralph was still her husband, whilst if she were gone he might be safe and happy with some other woman more blessed than herself. Safe and set free, while she, perhaps, poor earth-bound ghost, might still be longing for the warmth and comfort of her home, or to be taken into his arms for one blissful moment and be forgiven.

"I *must* be forgiven before I die," she whispered. "Be brave," she repeated to herself, "be brave!"

But her bravery seemed to have forsaken her, and

the "pity of self through all made broken moan," whilst another voice repeated, "Live to expiate. Suffer as much as you can here, in order that you may suffer less hereafter."

She seemed to have heard all that in the thunderous and solemn chords of the "Dies Iræ," in the requiems at Rome and Florence, but her human nature, worn to the uttermost, was not able to endure it. Had she not already suffered enough, though the purgatorial discipline had not blotted out ill doing? Was it possible that expiation could bleach our souls? Polly asked herself these questions in a vague unreasoning way. She was past reasoning; she could only feel. And she had none of that unnatural and prurient love of pain which exists in a few exceptional natures.

"My punishment," she whispered more than once, "is harder than I can bear."

* * * * *

It was Friday night. The cabs with firefly eyes were flitting through the darkness, and light was streaming from the door of one of the London churches as she passed it; the evening service was over, and the choir was practising. She could hear the sound of the music. Her first idea was that if it had been a Roman Catholic Church, with corners dimly lit, into which she could have crept, relieving her breaking heart with sobs, she would have been glad. Here the gaslight was too bright, the surroundings too shabby, and the few people who lingered too ill-dressed. But an evening anthem was being sung—not in Italian nor in Latin—but for the first time in words she could understand. And as the door was suddenly opened to let out some members of the congregation she strained her ears and caught—not the awful tones of the “Dies Iræ,” but the softer sounds of music in a boy’s clear voice, which lifted the funereal blackness from her soul.

“Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy

laden," sang the chorister. What was it that followed? The door was instantly closed again, but Polly's memory supplied the remainder of the sentence.

She had heard it when she was a little girl; she had learnt it in a Bible-class, before she had crossed the seas, and before—ah, long before she had been set apart from other girls and women by the isolation of her irremediable act.

Could it be all true? Ben and Dick had made fun of it, and when she had heard those clever friends of her husband's talk, in their London home, she had gathered that they looked upon it as a thing of the past. Development, yes, that was the expression—development! It came into poor Polly's mind to remember how proud those men—Mr. Dangin amongst them—had been of the intellectual development of the last century—proud of the standing-point so recently gained by the experimental and philosophical work of centuries, and of that Evolution which did not imply

finality, but enabled men and women to look forward to greater triumphs of human intellect and greater heights of human progress on Earth. Yes, it was all to be on Earth. She had not been educated enough to understand the amount of real truth in this talk about Evolution; she had only imbibed the ideas that a miracle was a mere delusion of infantile minds, and that the adaptation of every creature to its environment rendered the doctrine of sin an absurdity.

What had *she* to do with miracles?

As she asked herself the question, she was conscious of that agony of inquiry—that old cry to the Living God, echoed from generation to generation and too often accompanied by the sense of falling back to the cruel realities of Earth, crushed and unheeded.

“Come unto Me all ye that labour!”

She put her hands to her ears, as she still groped on her way, but she could not keep out the words. Ah, how clever those men had been! How proud she had been of knowing them, and how pleasant it was to

feel oneself so superior to the majority of women and children who had only cut their milk teeth.

Yes, but not one of the wits and clever people had said, "Come unto Me."

She was hungry and giddy, and had lost all sense of reality. But celestial harmonies seemed to have broken upon her ears.

Again and again the words rang in her ears, and always coupled with the Ineffable Name. And then once more she thought of Eleanor and her intense human sympathy.

Who was it who had spoken words to her when she had once been in a mocking mood—spoken of a victorious hope which was to make the withering world vital and young? "Socrates and many wise philosophers in the world have said good things, but there is only One who said, 'Come unto Me and I will give you rest,'" Sister Eleanor had once repeated, —paraphrasing the words of S. Augustine—with her face illuminated by a new expression of brightness and

peace, as she had spoken to unwilling ears of how the miserable stains, the dark and bitter shame of sorrowful and stricken hearts could be blotted out for ever. How was it she had forgotten Sister Eleanor? She remembered that Eleanor had not exactly approved of her from the first, but that she had been always kind to her. If she had lectured her, the lecturing would only have hardened her, but she had been sympathetic and tender. She might have something definite to tell her. It now seemed to her that Eleanor might be the one to give her a helping hand out of the slough and out of the muddy ways. For to be a repentant sinner was the surest passport to a heart like hers! Thank God that such people existed! Where was she now? It was with an effort that Polly recalled the fact of how, after having been trained in nursing, the Sister had been helping in another department of work, and was at the orphanage not far from Hampstead.

All Polly's money was exhausted now. She had

spent the last shilling in buying herself some biscuits and a glass of wine at a confectioner's shop, one of the last to close. That had been open late, but it was much later now. In a few hours the morning would dawn, and she might knock at the door of the orphanage and ask for Eleanor. How to get there was the problem, but it was only a few miles off, and the food she had taken had given her a little strength. There was no one to notice the solitary, absorbed woman walking straight on, with her thin shoes almost worn into holes, and with garments unable to keep out the bitter east wind, muttering at times to herself, with a strange wildness in her eyes. The merciful darkness hid her, and the streets in the suburbs were at times so deserted that she could put her hand to her side and moan without anyone hearing her. Once, indeed, she fell prostrate on the muddy, slippery ground, with the rain falling on her face, and the muddy earth soiling her embroidered dress. And once she was compelled to sit down on a doorstep, wish-

ing that she had a walking-stick to assist her tottering footsteps. It was always rather limping than walking, but still she went deliberately onward. It was no longer intentional suicide, nor a desire for expiation by inflicting suffering on herself. She had ceased to reason about anything. But far away—far away, in spite of the mists which enshrouded her, she seemed to see a light, first quivering and faint, but by degrees growing brighter.

* * * * *

It was five o'clock on Saturday morning, and the light glimmering in a dormitory at the end of long lines of little white beds had already become invisible in the dawn. On the various pillows little heads were still reposing, and little cheeks hardly to be seen above the bedclothes were still rosy with sleep, when the sister in charge was roused by the news that a policeman on his beat had found a woman,

well-dressed, but looking like a poor, despairing wretch, with death, so to speak, in her face, lying apparently insensible at the gate. He had called to her, and though at first she did not answer, yet at last she had spoken in a voice which was barely audible, and asked for one of the sisters.

"It is not a part of our work here, she has come to the wrong house," said Eleanor, as she hastily dressed herself. Then, used as she was to helping misery of all sorts in a vast organization, she hurried out to look at the woman, and to decide what it would be best to do for her.

* * * * *

Polly was again insensible when kind faces bent over her. And when she woke a few hours afterwards it was still as if she were in a sort of mesmeric trance. She could no longer see anything plainly around her—it was as if a veil interposed

between herself and her fellow-creatures. She heard voices speaking to her as from a distance, and was aware of no further pain—the old ache at her heart had gone. The first thing of which she was distinctly conscious was the mingling of pity, sorrow, and yearning—the divine compassion in a face the light of which had been kindled at no earthly source, but which was bending over her bed.

“They thought the sick nursing had knocked me up a little, and gave me a change here. It is a good thing we cannot always choose our own work. But they have given me leave to take you in here, just at this crisis, though it is contrary to our rules. This is the Infirmary. It is very good of them to make such an exception for us; I have been trained in nursing, as you know; you were right to come to me; I will try and make you well, and you are to be moved into a hospital ward directly you can bear the change,” said Eleanor, the tears of pity dimming her eyes as she gently arranged the bedclothes.

"I do not want to get better," moaned the sick woman, "I would like it to be always as it is—now—to lie still—with you—who are merciful."

"Life and death are in God's hand."

"Ah," panted the sufferer, "but I have come to you because I am outside the pale of God's laws and man's."

"No one is outside."

"Not when they have dared to defy ordinary laws, not when they have deceived themselves systematically," said Polly in her excitement, as she tried to pant out her story. "If I could have died when it all happened—there, with my darling, before she died! She suffered a good deal and I did my best for her before she began to dwindle, but I don't want anyone to do their best for me. I have committed an irreparable, unpardonable sin."

"No, no, not unpardonable, for your eyes have been opened. We seldom see things as they really are, or measure them at their true value. But Death need

not be the leveller. I do not believe you will die—”

“But I want to tell you——”

“Wait till you are better. Meanwhile, tell God—what hinders you? You are not strong enough yet to tell me,” said Eleanor, as she bent lovingly over her, her hand curved over the nape of the neck which she was tenderly supporting. “The Good Shepherd has a deep pity for all who have gone astray. In the wilderness He sought the sheep which was lost.” And then it was that she dared to speak of the deep essential truths which lie at the root of cut and dried formulas, and of the supplementing force supplied to the weakness of man’s nature.

“*You* are the one to comfort me with all this. And I—I stood in your way! I supplanted you!” murmured the sick woman, her physical sensations drowned in an overwhelming flood of feeling. “If you can be so good to me, why should not God be good?”

“Like as a father pitieth his children,” came the answering words, in which all angry voices and all

hasty condemnations seemed to be drowned in the strain of sweet music which went on in her own soul. "Those are wild fancies which you have about me. How *can* our goodness be compared to the goodness of Him Who yearns to forgive the Prodigal, and fall on his neck with tears?"

And the words of encouragement seemed to form themselves into a prayer, as if the wings of God's mercy were already stretched above the vagrant.

A sense of rest and peace, a flow of hope which she could not account for or define, a conviction that God still loved her and had heard her prayer for mercy, though man had not heard it, and that the door of salvation was open for her, came at last upon the penitent woman. It seemed to be a gift from some unseen power, and as the Sister knelt by the bedside her own heart rose in prayer.

She did not want to be well again. A feeling of having left the battle behind her, and of being soothed and comforted, with no more aching from her wounds,

came upon her. Her breathing became more regular. The flames crackling and darting upwards, with forked and restless tongues, from the fire which had been lighted in the infirmary, as the morning was cold and the slight rattle caused by the occasional fall of ashes from the grate—were the only sounds to be heard in the room, and Polly had peace at last.

She did not trouble herself any more even about Ralph, for the new resignation which had come to her had been accompanied by an infinite renunciation. She knew nothing very certainly for hours afterwards. It was more like a dream than a reality—when she opened her eyes and found that she was lying, carefully tended, in the ward of a private hospital—and that her husband, with the old love-light in his face, was on his knees beside her bedside—holding one of her hands in his.

“Speak to her,” urged Eleanor’s low, pleading voice, “she will be able to bear it now. It was rather a state of stupor from all she had gone through than

one of alarming unconsciousness. You must not stay long, but a cheering word from you will be the best medicine for her now."

How had it all happened? How had that other woman, whose whole life was renunciation, managed—agitated and bewildered as she was—to achieve the final victory over the man? &

"Oh, no," she had said eagerly, when she sought him in his own house and stood before him, not to be daunted. "No Christian could have continued to argue as you did, and yet you called yourself a Christian. It *could* only have been a question of time!" she added in her earnestness, hardly knowing what arguments she used, in her anxiety to melt him. "Anyhow your heart would have returned to her at last. Anyhow you would have recognized that the marriage tie was so indissoluble, and the whole question so vital and far-reaching, to the very roots of human life, that it *could* not have been laid aside! But I know you too well—you love your wife and all that

God loves in her, all that is good and noble in her, too sincerely ever to turn your back upon her. Even if you had done so," cried Eleanor, in her depth of passion, "He in Whom I believe would have remained with her and succoured her. It is because we Christians have not carried out our Christianity, because we are not consistent, that the world cries shame on us."

THE END.



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